Trade War

Necrospace - 3

Sean-Michael Argo

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Annotation

Business is war, and business is booming. Economic competition has escalated into a full scale galactic conflict, and the salvage marines are pulling hard duty at the center of the catastrophe. All around them vast armies of conscripts, convicts, and contractors are fighting their way across hostile alien worlds and through the cold void of space at the will of their corporate masters. Whether the marines are boldly piloting their scrap wagons through the debris fields of defeated battle fleets one step ahead of deadly slave traders, speeding in makeshift boats across a backwater planet towards a bloody conflict with the creatures that lurk just beneath the surface, or storming the trenches of a tomb world defended by pitiless mercenaries, everything is a race against other violent factions looking to cash in. Samuel Hyst is surviving the war one day at a time, though while he is away at war his family must contend with new enemies and dangers of their own, and to reach them he will join a revolution.

- Sean-Michael Argo
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Sean-Michael Argo
TRADE WAR

PROLOGUE

It is the Age of the Corporation; where the common man toils under the watchful eye of the elite and their enforcers. The rule of law has long been replaced by the politics of profit. For many centuries the Covenants of Commerce have ruled mankind, from boardroom to factory floor, from mine deep to fertile field, and upon the battlefields of heart, of mind, and distant star.

The dark ages of feudalism have returned with capitalistic ferocity, and while there is no peace among the stars of mapped space, business is booming.

Impoverished workers drown in debt while they labor for subsistence income, mercenaries of every kind wage war under the banner of any company willing to meet their price, scavengers and space pirates loot what they can, all to the backdrop of a ceaseless struggle for economic dominance.

To be a human being in such times is to be one among countless billions in a civilization spread across a vast universe, all ensnared in the same blood-soaked web of capitalism, most doomed to be ground to dust amidst the gears of progress. There are some people however, those rare few, who rise from the ranks of the faceless masses to make their mark upon history.

This is one such tale.

1. SCRAP WAGON

The void battle had taken place in high orbit above Planet UK6712, approximately thirteen standard months after official trade war had been declared between the corporations of Helion and Grotto. UK6712 was well within the edges of surveyed necrospace, beyond the Ellisian Line, and had been claimed by a Helion exploratory force. The explorers, however, discovered that they did not have the military strength to occupy the sizeable dead city or defeat the robotic guardians that awaited them on the planet's surface, so they had waited for support elements to join them. By the time a Helion battle fleet arrived, so had an equivalent force from Grotto Corporation.

It had been a swift and brutal affair, as frigates and combat craft from both sides engaged in a furious firefight at close range. The command elements of both fleets were eager to seize a victory for their Bottom Line. After seventeen minutes of conflict the Helion forces retreated, leaving UK6712 to be plundered by Grotto.

In those seventeen minutes thousands of naval crew, support staff, and troopers lost their lives on both sides of the conflict as the fleets tore into each other. Now, merely twenty minutes after the last shot was fired and the Helion forces had made a hard burn out of the system, the Baen Reaper tug entered the conflict zone to loot the wreckage.

"Tango Leader, Reaper Actual, you are clear to launch," crackled the voice over the intercom system of the cramped navigation deck, "Good hunting."

Boss Samuel Hyst nodded and leaned back in his chair so that he could fasten his safety harness, an action mimicked by Boss Ulanti and Boss Marsters as the three squad leaders prepared themselves for flight. Samuel's bulky combat armor, like the rest of them, had been modified with void seals, which while protecting his fragile body from the frozen vacuum of space, made fluid movement difficult. When he and the rest of the Reapers had fought a boarding action years ago on a space hulk, Samuel had found the void seals distracting and cumbersome, now, after so many months of brutal trade war, he had become quite accustomed to the seals.

The rest of the marines of Tango Platoon were below on the staff deck, strapped into rows of seats that lined the broadsides of the ship. The ship's call sign was RRV59, Resource Recovery Vessel 59, but the support crews and marines called all such ships 'scrap wagons'. It was a fitting description in Samuel's mind, the primary function of the vessels was to enter void battle sites post-conflict and hastily remove anything of value from the wreckage.

No two scrap wagons were alike. Until the outbreak of this mega-conflict there had been no need for such a specialized vessel. Samuel and the Reapers had conducted countless void salvage operations through the years. Typically they based out of the main Reaper tug and used handheld personal transport units to move around, collecting their salvage on a simple mag-sled that would carry the haul back to the tug.

The scrap wagons were all retro-fitted ships, some from Grotto's own stock and others captured vessels from Helion or the Red List. The support teams, with help from the marines, had grafted massive patchwork armor plating to the fronts of the ships so that they could move through debris fields at higher speeds instead of carefully threading their way through the swirling chaos of the site. There was so much material in motion in the aftermath of a void battle that it was like sending a ship into a tempest of metal and frozen chemicals.

Using the traditional method of void salvage it would take months, perhaps even years of waiting for the debris storms to settle out as bits and pieces came together and began to form gravitational fields. Grotto did not have that kind of time, nor did Helion, or the pirates, and that meant that neither did the Reapers.

The engines of the scrap wagon fired up as the launch bay doors slid open. Samuel was pressed back against his seat as the ship reached full throttle and screamed out of the hangar. The scrap wagon hurtled into the void and immediately the pilot toggled the ship's trajectory to aim it towards the center of the debris field. Samuel knew that it would only be a few minutes before the first pieces of the wreckage would begin impacting the ship. This was dangerous work, but it had to be done fast in order to beat whatever other scavengers were lurking in the darkness of space waiting to pounce.

Samuel had never truly appreciated the nuances of space travel until this desperate phase of the war, and though it had been a grueling year of non-stop campaigning, the marine took a moment to let the beauty of what he saw to wash over him.

Samuel, like most other marines, endured his space travel while in the belly of ships such as the Reaper tug or the assault craft. This particular scrap wagon had once been a light cargo hauler and the navigation chamber, while small, had several transparent viewports from which Samuel could actually see the debris field with his own eyes. To see video images or data readouts was one thing, but to witness the vastness of the destruction backlit by the light reflected off of the greenish white clouds of the planet's atmosphere and the impossibly grand physics at work in the debris storm deeply moved Samuel.

The marine watched in silence as the wagon careened towards the

debris. As they drew near, Samuel could see the emerging outlines of at least one sizeable starship among the corpses of several smaller vessels. Most of them were dead and drifting, their hulls having been ripped asunder by enemy fire and their crews either killed in the battle or sucked out into hard vacuum. As the first chunks of debris bounced off of the armored hull of the wagon, Samuel could see several different ships near the core of the debris field.

"Boss, you seeing this?" asked Samuel as his eyes landed upon the wreckage of a large and menacing ship at the apex of the tempest.

"Helion Gun Frigate," answered Boss Ulanti as she followed Samuel's gaze. "Hard to tell in all that soup, but it looks like an Alpha Class to me."

"That would explain why Helion backed off so quickly," nodded Boss Marsters as he sat with his eyes closed and slowly breathed in and out, giving Samuel the impression that the thought of once again slamming into a debris field at speed was perhaps undermining Wynn's patented cold calm. "Standard battle fleets only ride with one or two ships sporting weapon batteries that heavy. From the pattern of the debris my guess would be that the frigate pushed too deep into the Grotto line, got cut off from the main group."

"Helion does seem to breed their people with a flair for overconfidence," said Boss Ulanti. She sat back and began opening and closing her fists as the craft shook with the impacts of larger sized debris, "In the boardroom and on the battlefield."

"Boss, I gotta say that sounds like Grotto propaganda talking," said Samuel, keeping his tone light to lessen the sting of his words, "All due respect."

"It is and it isn't, Hyst," answered Boss Ulanti. "Grotto and Helion are the two biggest mega-corps in mapped space, and they couldn't be more different.

Propaganda is like the molded protein blocks they serve at mess, inert until you decide what flavor to infuse it with. They are force-fed just as much of it as we are. In their minds Helion is sleek, high speed, and focused on expansion through technological progress while Grotto is a lumbering juggernaught that consumes or recycles everything in its path. They underestimate us, Prybar, because to them, we are low tech brutes.

I've fought Helion half a dozen times in my life, and every time is the same. They think they're better than us, and that makes them arrogant and sloppy."

"At the end of the day they still buy their bullets from the same place we do," chuckled Samuel with a gallows smile as the wagon shuddered from a sizeable impact. Whatever they had hit was sufficient to knock the ship off course and it took several moments of

trick flying for the pilot to realign with the target.

“Welcome to the war machine,” laughed Boss Ulanti, and in that moment Samuel realized he’d never heard her do that. It was like watching a hyena preparing to steal a kill in the nature vids he’d seen during his compulsory education.

Samuel watched as the frigate loomed closer and closer until it had all but encompassed the field of vision provided by the view port.

“Initial sweeps of the vessel are indicating that the frigate still has life support and cabin pressure in the aft section, I’m definitely reading survivor activity,” reported the co-pilot as she tuned her instruments and continued to monitor the target, “So much interference out there, I wasn’t able to get a clean sweep till now.”

“See if you can get a lock on their comms frequency and phase them a Grotto standard surrender agreement,” ordered Boss Marsters as the shadow of the massive vessel began to engulf them. “That’s the engine and hard functions quadrant of the vessel, so the chances are that most of those survivors are Journeyman rated tech staff, possibly a few Master Class rates.”

“A surrender agreement, sir?” asked the co-pilot, turning in her seat with a look of confusion. “Don’t we just sweep and clear like always?”

“Helion won’t staff their Alpha vessels with any ratings below Journeyman,” explained Boss Ulanti just before the pilot dove under a large piece of shredded metal while the wagon neared its target. “The Entry levels wouldn’t be fit to scrub the floors on a ship like that. This time the crew is part of the salvage.”

A sudden chill swept through the cabin as the co-pilot looked to Samuel, who turned and met the cold eyes of Boss Marsters. The co-pilot turned back and activated her phase deck to send the surrender agreement after searching for the comms frequency and finding it very quickly.

Samuel could hear the high pitched keening of the frigate’s distress call, and found himself suddenly feeling very sorry for the surviving crew aboard the ship.

If Boss Marsters could see the value of capturing skilled tech staff, then Samuel had no doubts that there would be others lurking in space who would share that opinion.

The Reapers had not yet faced any slavers, but the distress signal had been broadcasting for over half an hour now and if someone was listening they would know that there were survivors.

Like the Reapers, the other carrion outfits that operated beyond the Ellisian Line were not in the business of taking prisoners. However, the rumor going around the barracks was that there was a new player in the trade war, some kind of highly organized slaver

cartel called Tasca. If there was ever a chance to meet Tasca operatives it would be during just such a scenario, in Samuel's thinking.

The fact that the Helion survivors had been broadcasting meant that they were trapped on the ship without any means of escape and were desperate for rescue. Desperate enough to alert anyone with a comms deck to their presence, likely knowing that they were a valuable commodity.

"Boss, if they're broadcasting, then they want to attract attention, might be that they won't put up a fight," Samuel observed as the co-pilot activated the assault countdown for one minute, bathing the cabin in a strobing yellow light.

"Unless their plan is to attract a rescue party and attempt to seize our boat once they draw us into the ship," said Boss Marsters. "Or they might come peacefully in the hopes that Helion will make ransom, and barring that, at least Grotto labor camps are less hellish than the life they'd endure if the slavers reach them first."

"Tasca," spat Boss Ulanti with a snarl of contempt, "I hope they try to steal our salvage. I'm getting tired of the mess hall rumor mill making them out to be the new bogeyman. Just carrion birds like the rest of us."

"Half our cadre are new recruits, and not just from Baen," said Samuel, feeling compelled to engage Lucinda Ulanti with a calming tone, something both he and Wynn Marsters had been doing more and more ever since the Vorhold campaign. "We can't blame them for being spooked, they have no idea that we already fought and buried the worst of the worst. If a crew of well-armed slavers is the hardest meat they go up against, I figure that's a blessing right?"

Samuel's question hung in the air for a moment, as neither of his comrades chose to answer him. Then the assault countdown hit zero.

The scrap wagon's armored prow, already battered from the rough trip through the storm, nearly buckled from the impact of its collision with the frigate. The pilot was good. He had managed to steer the wagon through the debris storm and wedge the vessel into a gaping wound in the frigate's broadside.

Unlike the assault craft used in ship-to-ship conflicts, the scrap wagons were not intended to punch through the hull of an enemy vessel. The wagon jockeys, as they had become known, would pilot the craft directly into the massive breaches in enemy vessels that had been created during the prior void battles. The jockeys would push their craft deep enough into the target that they could eject their marine cargo and then actively begin salvage operations. If they had a light enough touch, the jockeys could reverse the vehicle and pull away from the target with extreme alacrity. This tactic would allow

the wagons to work much like mosquitoes; they landed, they pillaged, then took off again to pillage the next site. In this way a ‘swarm’ of scrap wagons could plunder a vessel the size of the frigate in a matter of hours. Focusing only on salvaging the ten percent of materials that fetched the highest prices, leaving the remaining ninety percent of the salvage to less effective and profitable methods had allowed their own profit margins to make the careers of several bureaucrats and luminaries within Reaper Command.

Pirates, Red Listers, and other salvage outfits did not have the manpower, ships nor military might that would enable them to lay claim to the entire void sight. However, with small ships, moving quickly, they could surgically salvage large sites in much the same way as the Reapers. In fact, according to rumors that Samuel had heard in the mess hall, it was a pirate salvage operation that had given Reaper Command the idea for the scrap wagon swarms in the first place.

All of these factors combined to create a mad dash scenario wherein many outfits, including the Reapers, would rush into a salvage to claim the highest profit items, fighting each other for the spoils. It was a foregone conclusion that the massive hive fleets and corporate operations would do the heavy salvage of the sites, which was standard Reaper work, but the price point of those high value items was sufficient to warrant the expense and risk of the wagon swarms.

As it was, Samuel knew in the pit of his stomach that this op wasn’t going to go smoothly. When there were survivors it never did. The Reapers had arrived swiftly after the battle, though Samuel knew that if he and his marines were disembarking into the ship then it was highly possible that others were as well. Even now, as Samuel leapt out of the exit hatch and flew through the zero gravity environment of the interior, he knew there could be pirates or scavengers just as heavily armed as he was lurking within.

The rest of Tango Platoon hurled themselves out of the wagon and began filling the landing zone. Samuel ignited his rifle lights and swept his weapon across the darkened chamber, the remains of a munitions storage area. He could tell from the blast points and the angle of the torn metal hull that one or more artillery projectiles had impacted and breached the room, after which the munitions cache had exploded and blown out much of the hull.

There were several interior hatches that were open, leading into the darkness of the ship, and Samuel knew that this must have been one of the critical hits that had ultimately killed the ship. Once the hull was breached the atmosphere would have bled out, carrying with it any crew or equipment that weren’t strapped down until someone

was able to shut enough hatches to seal the area off. A single penetrating hit like this could wipe out entire decks if the ship's crew didn't react quickly enough.

"Listen up, Tango Platoon, there's been a change of plans," The voice of Boss Marsters came over the com-bead as the marines created a defensive semi-circle perimeter around the wagon, "We are leaving the metal where it is, but keep an eye out and put locator pins on anything that looks worth a second trip. Scans show that we have cabin pressure and survivors in some of the aft deck, looks like engine and hard services. That means we have high ratings that are likely to be among those survivors, which represent enough value to make them our primary acquisition target. They set up a distress signal, so they will be expecting us, but that doesn't mean they'll come without force. Keep your wits and try not to kill anyone who doesn't give you a reason. Ulanti?"

"If they're wearing engineer duds or have tech patches do your best to neutralize and capture," barked Boss Ulanti as she made a show of using bonding tape from her hip belt to fasten the cylindrical shock stick to the end of her rifle like a bayonet, "The shocker in your standard kit has enough juice to ignite dead tech if the wiring is still undamaged, so it has more than enough to knock out a few Helion gearheads."

"Mount your sticks and move out by squads," ordered Boss Marsters as he finished taping his shocker to his rifle, "Boss Hyst, you take point; we move in twenty seconds, expect resistance and assume there will be competition arriving shortly."

By the time the twenty count was up the fifteen marines had prepared themselves, all the while the ship rumbled with various impacts. Some of them, Samuel knew, were the other scrap wagons making their landing and disgorging other platoons, though any one of the many shudders could be from the afore mentioned competition. There was an entire battlefield to scavenge, and only half a dozen wagons were dispatched to the frigate. It had the potential to be the prize salvage, and if there were lurkers on the fringes of the debris field waiting to pounce and had the hardware to make a fight out of it; this is where they would strike.

Samuel gestured to Ben, who had swapped out his heavy machine gun rig for a breaching shield and assault shotgun, as was standard procedure for ship-to-ship engagements. With the grim visage of the man's permanent face mask, Ben looked downright terrifying in the deep shadows and hard light of the wreckage Samuel thought to himself as he watched his best friend kick off and soar towards the open hatch on their left. The very sight of Ben Takeda had proven to be demoralizing to some of the less stalwart scavengers the squad had

encountered, though Samuel suspected that such an advantage wasn't going to be much of much use on this run.

Bianca Kade slid past Samuel, giving him a curt nod as she followed Ben. All things considered, the marine decided, that tiny acknowledgement signaled some measure of progress.

Things between him and Bianca had been somewhat strained ever since Samuel's forced return to Tango Platoon, and not just because of the emotional intensity of their former separation.

In the brief time that Samuel had been away on Pier 16 before being recalled, Bianca had been promoted to Boss and Squad Hyst had become Squad Kade. According to Boss Marsters the young woman was the ideal choice, a decorated veteran, and had shown leadership traits worth rewarding. Though she had not led Squad Kade into combat, they had trained for a time under her leadership, and she had excelled.

Sadly, her promotion was short-lived, as was the pay raise, when the commission was returned to Samuel once he passed muster. Since then Bianca had only communicated with Samuel at the barest minimum level, as if she were simply another marine on the squad. However, as yet more and more combat missions were heaped upon their shoulders Bianca's disposition towards him had softened slightly. Needless to say, they had not shared each other's bed after missions as they once had. Samuel felt that he had enough to worry about just trying to stay alive, so the distractions of their past relationship were best left behind.

Samuel fell in after Holland Sager, the platoon medic, leaving Marcus Baen, a recruit from Baen 4 that had been folded into Squad Kade during the Reaper fleet's brief rest and refit before the trade war officially began. Marcus still instinctively followed Bianca's lead, as she was his first squad leader, though he had adapted well enough to the change in leadership. It had been a long war already, and Samuel was happy that he hadn't been forced to learn any new names since coming back. The same could not be said for other squad leaders, as there had been casualties for both Ulanti and Marsters since the war's beginning.

As Ben sailed through the darkness, the additional light tabs on his breaching shield gave the wreckage an even more sinister feel to it than it already had.

The marines were careful as they proceeded, checking their backshadows on the return and paying extra attention to dead corners. All of them knew that despite the danger in seizing a salvage claim so soon after the battle, as they moved through the spiraling corpse of the massive ship they silently acknowledged that it would have been hell to claim it once the site had been on the drift long enough for

there to be an entrenched hostile presence. There were so many side hatches, narrow corridors, and dark chambers already, made all the more deadly by the many ambush zones created by the artillery ripping through the ship.

It was better this way, thought Samuel as he swept his rifle back and forth across the blown out corridors and shattered rooms while they pressed on, because their enemies would be on equally tenuous footing if a fight broke out.

“Hyst report,” said Boss Marsters in the com-bead, prompting Samuel to turn his head to the right and notice several of the lights of Squad Marsters moving through the ship one deck above them, such was the damage the vessel had sustained during the void battle.

“This place is a tomb so far, Boss, just empty rooms and lots of broken spaceship,” stated Samuel as he pushed his way through the ranks so that he could join Ben at the front of the line and see what the soldier was silently pointing at. “No tags dropped so far either, we’re still moving through what look to be munitions and gun crew quarters. From the scorch marks, I’d say there were tertiary explosions throughout the deck after the first cache went nova. Everything was either slagged or voided.”

“Copy that, we can see your lights down there, looks like you’ll reach the end of the outer hull damage points in a few minutes, so expect to start finding sealed hatches soon,” Boss Marsters responded. “Ulanti report.”

“We’re almost to the hull opposite. Decided to thread the squad and follow the artillery craters,” came Boss Ulanti’s voice, with a slightly audible click pattern just behind the main volume of her broadcast, “I can see void and stars on the other side of the craters, looks like the det-rounds went all the way through and exploded just outside the hull, somebody needs to go back to Grotto gun school and learn how to time their charges.”

“Copy that,” answered Boss Marsters.

Ben pointed down the corridor to where part of the flooring had been melted away to reveal the corridor one level down. Just beyond that, a hatch was in full view. It had been sealed and a glowing green light pulsed weakly from the keypad, indicating that it not only had power, but a clean seal.

“Good catch, Takeda,” said Samuel, “If we’d rushed, the whole squad might have crossed the breach and never realized we’d overshot the start of their perimeter.”

“Boss, we’ve got the first hatch just below us, maybe thirty meters through a few holes in the deck plating, going to advance,” Samuel stated to his com-bead on the platoon channel.

“Roger, we will make our way down to support, nothing but solid

bulkhead up here," responded Boss Marsters, sounding almost disappointed that his group didn't make the catch first. "Remember to seal the hatches behind you as you advance, we don't know if the survivors have any void suits and I don't want to lose them to a sloppy cordon. No offense people, but we haven't executed a live ship sweep in years, stay alert and focus on your movement protocols."

"You heard the man, let's keep it tight," nodded Samuel as he turned to face the rest of the squad, "I'll pop the lock and we push in behind Takeda. Marcus you re-seal the hatch once we're inside, the whole deck will be bleeding atmosphere so everyone be prepared to get hit with lots of random debris."

"Hope this ain't the privy," grumbled Ben in his gravelly and digitized voice as he set his shotgun on the firing brace at the center of the shield and faced the hatch.

As Bianca, Holland, and Marcus closed ranks behind Ben, Boss Hyst took out his hand-welder and went to work on the lock. The hatch was easy enough to cut with the high-grade torches carried by the Reapers, which were much more powerful and yet more compact than what most civilian salvage operators would have access too.

The hand welder was the one tool possessed by the Reapers that was of the highest manufacture, making the low quality of their patchwork armor and mass produced cheap weapons all the more noticeable. They were better armed and armored than the average pirate, scavenger, or planetary militia; though any hereditary corporate soldier or mercenary elite had gear that made the Reaper kits look like they were the low bid crap that they were. Within seconds Samuel had cored the lock, and just before he rose to take his place behind Ben he depressed the green button that opened the hatch.

Instantly Ben was buffeted by atmosphere as it burst out of the open hatch, though it was not enough to knock him over. The big marine pressed onwards and rushed into the room with his shield and shotgun at the ready. Directly behind him came the rest of the squad, literally shoulder to shoulder, and in Marcus's case back to back, as the squad entered the room.

Their lights revealed a small repair bay, judging by the disarmed munitions and various work tables. Some of the smaller hand tools had been flung through the air to clang against Ben's breaching shield, though most of the room was filled with machinery that was bolted in place. Marcus immediately depressed the hatch and used a foamcore dispenser to fill the now slagged lock cavity with rapid hardening foam that would hold the seal and yet be easily burned through when Squad Marsters reached them.

The squad swept the room and made their way to the next hatch,

which had a small viewport. They could see part of the face of a man looking at them with wide eyes from behind the hatch, his expression a mixture of fear and anger. Samuel peeked through the viewport and witnessed a man in engineer duds retreating through another hatch that was clearly marked as hard services.

“Marcus, move up and core this lock, everybody else stack on Takeda. Looks like at least some of them are holed up in the main service chamber,” said Samuel as his orders were met with groans from the other marines.

“Main service chamber. Wow, Takeda, you really did jinx us,” moaned Holland as he joined the formation.

“We go in hot,” said Samuel in a tone of voice that broached no argument, channeling some of his old squad leader, Mags, as he broadcast to the squad channel, not wanting Boss Ulanti or Boss Marsters, much less Reaper Command, listening in. “If they’re prepared to surrender, then they won’t open up as soon as we pop the hatch, but if we start taking fire then let’s show them we mean business.”

The molten lock lost surface tension and collapsed in a flood of hot metal. As it did, Marcus depressed the release key and the door slid open as the marine hurled himself out of the way.

Takeda growled and charged through the entrance, fully prepared to take the brunt of enemy fire against his thick breaching shield. Samuel pressed his armored body against Ben’s, and Bianca to his, then Holland to hers, and finally as the tight wedge of marines cleared the entrance, Marcus fell in step behind them.

Boss Marsters had been hopeful about sending the surrender agreement. From what Samuel had heard around the fleet, sometimes ships that had been captured would make that choice. It happened infrequently, but being able to seize a claim without the expense of battle was certainly worth the effort of a simple phase exchange.

Sadly, it was probable that the phase was sent to a multitude of dead stations, and none of the men and women surviving aboard the ship were aware that surrender was an option. Several months, perhaps even years of custody within a Grotto labor camp while they waited for one of the ransom exchanges was, whether they realized it or not, a preferable alternative to the abuses they’d suffer at the hands of slavers and their black market clientele.

No sooner had the wedge of marines entered the service chamber they were under enemy fire. Ben’s breaching shield bucked and shook violently from the impacts of dozens of low velocity clouds of shot. Several errant pellets managed to thud into the armor of the marines behind him. Ben responded with a salvo of his own and with the precision and alacrity that only comes from continuous training the

Reaper began mowing down the hostile shooters. The marine's assault shotgun roared over and over as he hosed the chamber with a hurricane of shot. The assault tactic of the Reapers entering a hostile chamber during ship-to-ship missions was a time-tested method, and this time was no different.

Samuel kept his rifle in a mid-guard position so that he could quickly survey the battlescape even as he let his instincts guide his aim and trigger finger. With a quick thermal scan his helmet display detected no less than thirty-five people in the chamber.

Typically, thermals were inaccurate and thus the marines rarely used them during standard salvage missions, however, they were excellent for just this sort of void scrap. The ship had lost most of its atmosphere, and along with that, much of its heat. Even in this airtight chamber filled with breathable atmosphere, anyone not in a void suit would be freezing cold. The engine had powered down, so the only warmth left in the ship was what had remained after the battle, and what little the bodies of the survivors could generate.

A part of Samuel felt pity for the woman he shot three times in the chest as she fumbled with cold-numbed hands to reload her scattergun, and yet another part of him silently raged at her for taking up arms in the first place.

Samuel could see that at least half of the survivors were wearing black and yellow stripped tactical vests which marked them as naval security, armed with standard pattern scatterguns, which were typical armaments on most all corporate warships, and even the Reaper tugs.

On most ships they were often kept in lockers at different points in the ship so that the crew could break them out quickly in case there was a hostile boarding action. Petty officers and deck bosses had keys and controlled their issue. Apparently, on Helion frigates there was a subset of crew whose exclusive duty was shipboard security. Having such weapons handy was very useful in repelling pirate attacks or suppressing mutinies, however, when Samuel stepped out from behind Ben so that he could gun down another shooter, catching a few more errant and ineffective pellets as he did so, it became obvious they were dramatically less effective against opponents who were covered head to toe in combat armor and void seals.

The cor-sec staff had apparently received little training in the use of their weapons in zero gravity, because they did not properly brace themselves when shooting. When a security staffer fired their scattergun the recoil would send them spinning through the chamber even as they racked the slide and continued attempting to fire upon the marines. After the first furious seconds of the firefight there were easily twenty bodies hurling or drifting through the air, some alive and some dead. The rest of the engineers ducked for cover as the

hellish clouds of shot that didn't embed themselves in shield and armor were deflected and continued their flight through the chamber.

The marines pushed forward, using each other's opposing recoil velocity to allow them to maintain their formation so long as everyone continued to fire. Five marines against easily three times their number would have been difficult odds to beat under normal circumstances, but the engineers offered little in the way of earnest resistance.

Within seconds of their entrance, the chamber was transformed into a microcosm of the debris storm raging outside the ship. Bodily fluids, spent shell casings, bullet-riddled corpses, and clouds of shot filled the space with chaotic motion. Several pipes had been riddled in the fighting, and at least one was still under pressure and had begun to vent some of its unsavory contents into the chamber.

"*Marines! Break and subdue!"* bellowed Samuel, realizing that if he allowed his tight wedge of armored warriors to continue to spit death in all directions there would be no captives left to take. "*Target only active shooters!*"

With a discipline borne from years of combat the marines sprang into action. Ben let go of his shield as he swiftly reloaded his shotgun, while Bianca, Holland, and Marcus all launched themselves from the flooring and into the open space of the chamber, all with their shock cylinders crackling.

Samuel skirted to the side and slid over the floor to slam his armored form into the knees of an engineer who had been unarmed but had then given into the temptation to fight by reaching for a floating scattergun. The engineer, clearly and understandably unaccustomed to moving and fighting in zero gravity, spun head over heels when Samuel hit him. It was easy for Samuel to thrust his mounted shocker against the man's chest and zap him into unconsciousness.

"Kade, secure that hatch!" shouted Samuel as he looked up from the drifting engineer to see a security staffer ushering another engineer through a small door at the back of the chamber.

Bianca nodded and gathered her legs underneath her as she turned in space and fired several rounds into the far side of the room, toward no target in particular. She had positioned herself so that her trajectory would take her towards the hatch as the force of the recoil sent her body hurtling through the battle space. The veteran marine twisted so that she was facing the hatch as she sped toward it, moving much faster than the security staffer and the engineer.

Samuel could tell from her angle and speed that she was going to reach the hatch just after the Helion men opened it, and there was no telling what was waiting behind that door.

Samuel, still low to the floor, bunched his feet beneath him and

placed the heels of his boots against the wall as he pushed himself into a horizontal position with his hands. As he prepared himself, the marine could see Ben and Holland soaring back and forth across the debris strewn room zapping the survivors as Marcus did his best to keep up. From the looks of it most of the security staffers were dead or wounded beyond combat effectiveness and more than one engineer had moved out into the open with their hands up in a gesture of surrender.

"Shock everybody, even if they have their hands up!" snapped Samuel as he prepared himself to launch, seeing that Bianca and her Helion prey were moments from collision, "We'll sort them out once this area is secured!"

Samuel focused his attention on the hatch as he made adjustments to his body in order to perfect his aim. The security staffer depressed the release button and the hatch slid open. To the staffer's credit he shoved the engineer through the door first before turning around and producing a sidearm he must have had holstered somewhere on his harness.

Bianca didn't blink as she squeezed the trigger of her combat rifle and sent a round through the staffer's upper chest and one through his throat. The man had been fast on the draw, however, and had opened fire a second before the marine. Bianca's armor protected her body from being pierced by the bullet, but the opposing force of the round's impact, along with her own shooting, degraded her momentum significantly in addition to sending her sprawling off course.

Samuel kicked off and streaked across the chamber floor, gliding under most of the debris that would have otherwise impeded his momentum. The dying staffer drifted away from the open door as droplets of blood spewed into the zero gravity environment.

Bianca slammed into a series of pipes, which stopped her flight through space but took her well out of the contest for the door. As Samuel sped toward the open hatch he could see through the cloud of blood droplets that the engineer was wrestling with his own courage over whether to flee or attempt to close the hatch. That brief moment of hesitation was all the time Samuel needed to close the gap between them.

The Reaper splashed through the cloud of blood droplets with his shocker crackling, and before the engineer could do anything but back away a few feet the marine hit him with enough voltage to send him into unconsciousness.

Since the engineer had attempted to back away, Samuel was able to hit him with the shocker in passing. Even though his momentum was slowed, the marine still flew deeper through the corridor, past several other closed hatches and into the next room. It was what

appeared to be a control and observation bridge, though most of the equipment looked powered down.

A group of five men and women stood with their hands up and their backs against the plexiglass as the marine planted his feet and brought himself to a halt. He could see that four of engineers who stood before him wore Journeyman rating patches. One woman, who bore a Master Class patch, still managed to regard him with cool contempt despite his appearance and grand entrance

“You aren’t slavers,” stated the master engineer lowering her hands, even as Samuel responded to the gesture by raising his rifle to his shoulder, “Grotto Corporation?”

“Resource Exploration and Procurement Engineer Regiment, yes ma’am,” Samuel responded as he swept his rifle back and forth across the room to ensure that there were no hidden enemies lying in wait. “You are hereby invited to surrender your ship and your crew, pending liquidation and re-tasking according to skill and constitution.”

“I have already authorized the paperwork, we were about to phase when your, *ahem*, engineers cut our central power and life support.” Scowling, the master engineer she balled her fists in frustration. “Why offer us a chance to surrender and then launch a full frontal assault after we agree on terms?”

“Your people fired first,” snarled Samuel as he flexed his grip on the rifle handle.

“Reports had just come up from the engine room,” spat the master engineer with equal rancor, “Hostile boarders with trap casters and combat armor.”

Samuel paused for a moment, letting her words sink in, while behind him the sounds of battle had come to a halt and he could hear his squad rounding up the survivors.

The hand held comm device on the belt of a journeyman engineer signaled green for an incoming transmission, which sounded in the earpiece of the engineer. Whatever he heard made him look swiftly back and forth between the master engineer and the marine before speaking, the fear apparent on his face.

“Ma’am, the engine crew,” the man said, his voice trailing off as he looked back at the blood-splattered salvage marine.

Samuel keyed his com-bead to the platoon channel, and took a deep breath as he looked the master engineer in the eye and moved fully into the room.

“Boss Marsters, Boss Hyst, come in, over,” he said.

“Boss Marsters, send it,” came the response.

“Hard services chamber and works observation control deck secured, rough count fifteen hostiles KIA and twenty odd non-coms in

custody," reported Samuel as he nodded at the engineers and began herding them into the corridor and out into the main chamber.

"Copy that, we are sealing the first hatch behind us now, be on your location in thirty seconds. We will need to secure the non-coms and use the torches to cut an insertion point for the wagon so we can get these people out of there without exposing them to hard vacuum," said Boss Marsters, "Too bad half of them had to die for the rest to surrender, cuts the profit margin on the mission sheet."

"They thought we were slavers, Boss," answered Samuel grimly as he and his five prisoners emerged into the service chamber to see that the rest of the squad had rounded up the surviving engineers and herded them to the center of the room, though the chamber was still thick with floating debris and fluids. "Someone attacked their engine room two decks down, and the assailants were using trap casters."

"Copy. We need to update the task force, it was your find so it's your broadcast," said Boss Marsters with a low growl. "We proceed as planned, but everyone needs to prepare, we have a fight coming."

"Task Force Alpha, be advised," came Samuel's voice into the com-beads of the sixty Reapers who comprised the four platoon task force assigned to salvage the corpse of the gun frigate, "One or more slaver boarding parties are contesting the claim, probable location aft section, Tango Platoon set to engage."

The members of Squad Hyst looked up from their prisoners as Samuel moved his captives to join the others and as if on cue the platoon channel crackled with activity.

"Hostiles engine section, hullside!" reported Boss Ulanti in their collective com-beads before suddenly screeching, "*Contact! Contact*!"

2. SLAVERS

By the time Squad Hyst had used their safety cables and zip-ties to create a makeshift series of bonds and applied them to the seventeen captives, Squad Marsters was pounding into the services chamber. Boss Marsters made a quick survey of the room as he walked up to Samuel.

"Good work, marines, looks like there was a much thicker naval security presence than I would have expected, seems like you managed to secure the assets without too much collateral damage," said Boss Marsters as he observed the multiple bodies of naval security staff killed in the fighting and the few engineer corpses that still floated in the chamber, victims of crossfire and ricochet. "The hard part will be getting them out of here quickly without further shrinkage."

"Let's just kill the slavers and then take our time," Jada suggested as she and Claudius Jaeger, a marine who had joined the squad after the conflict on UK1326, moved to secure the chamber exit that lead deeper into the aft section. "Sounds like Boss Ulanti could use the help."

Boss Marsters silently nodded before he swept his gaze across the chamber one more time.

"Listen up, marines," he announced. We've learned the hard way that anybody willing to fight us over salvage is either desperate enough not to care or a high enough threat class to think they can push us off the claim. We have the assets in hand, and if the slavers can't have them they'll do their best to make sure we can't either, it's part of their business model. Asset shrinkage is not an option, so some of us will have to engage the threat while the rest prepare for pickup."

"Boss, they're people not assets, maybe calling them that is part of the problem here," snapped Virginia Tillman, her green eyes flashing angrily behind the tinted visor of her helmet.

"This is a hostile salvage not a factory floor Tillman, the lecture can wait till we're shipside," Boss Marsters retorted as he started pointing at marines and giving orders. "Takeda, pair up with Marr and you two run overwatch on the assets here. Marcus, I want you and Tillman to scout and cut a path from the external hatch to hullside that we can drop a suicide slide through. Once that's in place we can have the wagon crew keep the slide's bladder full and push the assets up the inside of the slide. We'll lose our entire backup atmosphere on the wagon, but it will give us a few seconds to get everyone loaded. I'll supervise the extraction."

"And the rest of us?" asked Holland as he applied the final

bandage to the ragged wound in one of the prisoner's arms, caused by some of the scattergun ricochet.

"Boss Hyst will lead the rest of you to the engine section to bail out Squad Ulanti and engage the slaver," Boss Marsters stated as everyone began to snap to his orders and move out.

"Excuse me, recovery engineer," said the master engineer, getting everyone's attention quite suddenly, as if they'd all forgotten she was present for their conversation, "The engine section is two levels down and behind at least four security doors, and without power to open the locks you'll have to cut through all of them."

"She's got a point," nodded Samuel, "What's the fastest way hullside?"

"Um, well you could go out the exit hatch and then follow the mechanical repair chute all the way up and out, those shoots give our mech staff access to the whole ship, but you'd need a void suit, too," answered the master engineer with a look of confusion on her face until understanding dawned as she took in the full sight of ten armored warriors equipped with void seals. "Ah, right."

"Marines on me," Samuel ordered and he moved quickly to the exit hatch and depressed the release button. Bianca, Holland, Claudius, and Jada fell in behind him and as the master engineer had said there was indeed a mechanics chute entrance on the far wall of the corridor.

Samuel went in first. As he looked up he could see that the chute went further up than his lights could illuminate. Grotto ships also had mechanic repair chutes; they were common in most large vessels. They were like the main arteries of space faring vessels, which allowed mech staff to move freely throughout the ship and repair the normally difficult to reach areas. The chutes were only large enough for one person to move through them at a time so chute usage schedules were important to keep the staff from having a traffic jam.

When the artificial gravity gyros were operational in the ship the climb through the chute was arduous, at least on Grotto ships, but it looked as if this Helion frigate was equipped with body sleds to allow for swift movement through the ship. In the zero gravity environment, the trip up the chute would be blindingly swift.

Samuel kicked off and his body sailed upwards through the chute, but within just a few meters he slammed into the side of the chute, causing Jada to crash into his feet.

"Come on, Prybar, you know this whole frigate is going left spinward now that it's dead and drifting, didn't you pick up on that while we were going through the blast craters?" chastised Jada as she disentangled herself from Samuel above her and Bianca below her.

“Angle left and you’ll sail all the way to the top without hitting the sides, nice and easy, and stay alert for the end of the chute.”

Samuel chose not to respond, partly out of embarrassment for holding up the whole squad, partly out of a fondness for her use of his nickname. Only the veterans of Tango Platoon dared called him Prybar, and even then only at the most opportune moments. Samuel had been Boss Hyst for some time now, and there were plenty of marines in Tango Platoon and many more in the Baen task force who knew him only as Boss. The name reminded him of what seemed in that moment to be a simpler time, when the only life he was responsible for was his own, and before he had really learned just how complicated the world could be, even for a simple marine. The Reaper adjusted his body and kicked off again, this time leaning spinward, and the scratch squad flew upwards through the darkened tunnel towards the hull.

They could all hear the reports over the comm of Squad Ulanti’s engagement with the slavers, and it sounded like Boss Ulanti had managed to prevent the enemy from escaping the engine section by engaging their rearguard. She had reported seeing what she believed might be the slaver’s ship, a converted Praxis Mundi mid-range cutter, maneuvering on the other side of the frigate.

Samuel estimated that if his squad breached the hull and cut to the right across the outside of the ship then his group would come down on top of any reinforcements that might be coming from the slaver ship. He agreed with Boss Marster’s roster choice, as the grizzled platoon leader had kept two high rated welders, Marcus and Tillman, and the two marines with the most effective crowd-control weapons, Ben and Harold. This left Samuel with three solid assault marines and Holland as a capable medic in case of any casualties for Hyst’s or Ulanti’s squads. There would be casualties, of that Samuel was certain.

For all of their capabilities, skill, training, and combat experience, the Reapers were still just salvage marines. The Reapers had been able to outmaneuver and outgun the naval security staff in a matter of seconds. In such moments Samuel almost forgot how low on the military measuring stick he and his fellow Reapers were compared to the elite mercenaries of the Merchants Militant or just below them in the hierarchy, the hereditary warriors of Grotto high society. In the vastness of necrospace it was easy to forget just how broad the spectrum ran between predator and scavenger. Reapers were the apex scavengers of the universe, but the slavers, especially if the Tasca rumors held any truth, were likely their equal, and it would be a real fight this time. As Samuel saw the end of the chute looming he found himself hoping that the force of natural selection would be on the side

of Grotto today.

Samuel reached out and let his hands and feet begin dragging on the walls of the chute so that by the time he was less than a foot from the end of the chute his momentum had been nullified. As soon as his ascent stopped, Samuel slipped his hand welder from its belt loop and began cutting.

As Samuel worked on creating an exit Jada reached out to grasp the clip and thin cable spooled around Samuel's belt. She clipped his cable to her belt, then passed the clip leading to her own spool of cable back to Bianca, who attached herself and then handed her own down the line. Holland was last in line; having spot welded the chute entrance hatch so that when Samuel blew the exit there would only be minimal atmosphere to clear. Had the hatch not been closed, much of the aft section atmosphere would have vented into space, carrying the marines with it into the void. As it was, everyone was tethered to one another and to several points on the chute itself. Both Holland and Claudius had looped their cables through the static panel handles nearby that presumably led into other chambers of the ship.

Finally Samuel's torch hit hard vacuum and everyone on the line felt the sudden pull upwards. Since there was only a few inches of vacuum through which the atmosphere could vent, for a short time it created a swirling tempest that made it difficult for Samuel to finish cutting the exit. By the time Samuel had finished there was just enough atmosphere left to carry the already freezing steel chunk of hull off into space.

Samuel carefully raised himself out of the chute and scanned the area. At first he was somewhat disoriented, because they were on a hull opposite of where he'd begun the mission. In just those few minutes of threading his way through the blast craters the marine had gotten used to having the bright green light of the planet on the other side of him. The light reflecting outwards from the planet's pale swirling surface bathed this side of the hull in an off-white and green radiance, creating patches of deep shadow where various arrays or bent blast craters jutted upwards from the hull. Samuel turned around when he realized that he was looking up the ship towards the prow. When he looked aft he could see muzzle flashes dotting the landscape of the aft outer hull.

"Everyone detach your mooring cables, there's no way we'll be able to move as a squad out here, too many surface obstacles," Samuel said to the group inside the shoot just as an unidentified piece of debris narrowly missed the marine and sheared off a piece of the hull as it careened onwards in its maddening flight. "Right, also we won't have much other than luck keeping us from being hit with debris from the void fight, so stay in motion, but hug whatever hard cover you can

find."

The marines quickly unhooked themselves and prepped their weapons, then one after the other they exited the chute. Samuel kicked off once Jada was out of the shoot, though the veteran marine was fast on the jump and was able to pass the squad leader quickly. Samuel watched Jada streak past him and cursed under his breath. Jada Sek was as hard a veteran as anyone, and she had endured whatever hell had been waiting for her and Boss Ulanti when the stalkers had captured them, but sometimes she was courageous to the point of reckless bravado.

While Samuel had kept his launch a modest affair, plotting his ideal trajectory before he pushed off, so that he could sail over the surface of the hull at a good speed but slow enough that he could make adjustments if there was an obstacle, Jada had put everything into her kickoff and sped well ahead of Samuel, ever further from the other three marines behind the squad leader.

Samuel did his best to push from his mind the thought of what he and his squad were actually doing. They had no tethers and no in-suit thrusters, so if they were pulled or pushed away from the gravitational pull of the frigate they would be drifting in the void with little hope of rescue. If one of them was cast away from the ship, that person's only chance of survival would be to fire their rifle in the opposite direction of where they wanted to go and hope they were able to aim their bodies well and had enough ammunition to try again if they missed the first time.

It was in moments like this, streaking across the hull of a dead frigate in the middle of a void battle debris storm toward a zero gravity firefight against an unknown enemy, that Samuel was in awe of his chosen life. He could have stayed at the factory, worked his life away and raised his family in the crushing bosom of Grotto society.

His children would experience the same compulsory education and job assignment, and like him, their lives would be planned out by the masters of Grotto, with little regard for what they might dream of becoming or want to do with their lives. There was, however, a kind of comfort in that sort of life bondage. Samuel knew many more citizens who accepted that life without complaint than he did those like himself or Ben Takeda, who wanted something more. Even many of his fellow marines approached the Reaper Corps like it was just another job assignment, and did not attach the kind of meaning to it that Samuel did. For most marines, being a Reaper was not a way out of Grotto, but more a way of finding their place in Grotto.

There wasn't a soul in the Reaper Corp who managed to last more than a few months who would have been happier working an assembly line. This was the kind of daredevil adventure that the

propaganda films were made of, and suddenly Samuel felt very conscious about the vid-recorder rig that he had affixed over his left eye as it captured his dramatic course across the hull of the gun frigate.

The recorders had been Virginia Tillman's idea, and she had brought several of them with her when she mustered back into the fleet. Virginia had been working on Baen 6 ever since leaving the corps, trying to start a labor union movement, with mixed results. Grotto, as a rule, was not pro-union, and in fact had used deadly force to suppress the last labor union over a century in the past.

Tillman's organization was a somewhat underground affair, one that Samuel intentionally kept himself ignorant of, due to his position in the command structure. However, he generally agreed with Tillman's ideas, and so when she had asked him to wear one of the rigs he had agreed under the condition that nobody but her know that he was doing so. The recorders were of Augur manufacture, and very high tech, so no one who wasn't paying strict attention would notice that Samuel's left eye was completely black as a result of the rig's lens aperture.

The pro-union marine was hoping that she could capture the living, breathing, bloody reality that was the life of a salvage marine, so that she could organize a union movement within the corps. They had talked about it, realizing that true change, at least in Grotto, would have to start with those who had the power to do violence, and work it's way back to the laborers. In her opinion, that change started with the marines, getting them better pay, benefits, living conditions, shore leave, and pension plans that only paid out once they were dead.

Samuel thought it was all a bit naively optimistic, but Virginia was a long time friend and ally, and he did agree at least in spirit with her ideas, so he wore the rig. Maybe now, Sura and Orion could actually see what he did for a living he thought as he moved his body to the left to avoid a small communications array as he shot across the hull. He wondered if it would make them happy or horrify them to see the kind of madness he endured for their sakes.

As Samuel neared the firefight the spinward drift of the frigate revealed the slave cutter coming up on the right side. It was moored to the hull with several cables that must have been deployed by individuals in void suits since the ship had no discernible grafting clamps which would have been expected of any ship outfitted for salvage operations.

To his eyes the cutter looked more like a raiding ship, meant for surviving the hard burn of a rapid descent into planetary atmosphere and then equipped with turbo-thrusters to get it back into orbit once it

had pillaged its target. There was no doubt in Samuel's mind that this was a slaver ship. That was confirmed when he saw the first of the enemy combatants emerge from behind an elevated heat vent in the frigate's hull.

"Jada, hostile right!" shouted Samuel as he swept his rifle up to get a bead on the enemy and fired. The angle of the shot and his speed made the shot difficult and the round went wide.

Jada twisted at the waist and brought her legs around so that she could plant them on the hull and slow her movement, which was the only thing that kept her from being ensnared by the slaver's trap-caster. The slaver's high-velocity mesh net slammed into the hull just ahead of Jada's body, the barbs that peppered the outer edge of the net burying themselves in the metal of the ship.

Jada sailed over the net and fired off several shots from the hip which missed the slaver, but did send him diving for cover back behind the heating vent. Samuel's trajectory had been thrown off by his shooting and the marine slammed into a heating vent parallel with the slaver.

Despite having the wind knocked out of him the marine raised his rifle and fired several rounds into the deck and vent on the right side, hoping to drive the slaver out of hiding. Sadly, the enemy operative was made of sterner stuff, and did not let himself get spooked into running. Instead, the slaver launched himself out of the right side, a split second after Samuel's bracketing fire, apparently understanding the tactic and confident that the marine would not sustain his fire.

Jada, in expectation of the slaver being driven into her field of fire, had advanced on his left side, exposing herself to the enemy's new vantage point.

Samuel attempted to adjust his aim, though he was still recovering from the recoil of his first salvo and had used his off hand to steady himself against the vent. The marine got his first full view of the slaver, and he sucked in his breath.

The operative was using a light rating armored dropsuit with on-board thrusters, a piece of equipment that would allow him to move and fight in atmosphere, underwater, or in the void with equal efficiency. The cost of that suit, along with the man's trap-caster and the other assorted weapons that Samuel could see affixed to the man's tactical harness, was equivalent to a year of Reaper hazard pay.

This man was no scavenger.

The thrusters embedded in the slaver's dropsuit allowed him to glide up and over Jada while firing his trap-caster on the move. The marine didn't see the net coming for her until the last moment, as the mesh projectile only blossomed when it neared its target. Jada raised her left hand to shield herself instinctively, and the net enveloped her

from thigh to head, the barbs sinking deep into her armor.

Jada screamed in pain as she was slammed onto her back against the hull by the force of the net, the rest of the barbs that weren't piercing her drilled into the metal of the ship locking her in place. In the blink of an eye Jada was out of the fight. The gears at the center of the net ground themselves together and pulled the mesh tight across her so strongly that were it not for her combat armor it was likely that the mesh would have bit into her flesh in at least a few places.

The trap-casters were high end slaver tools, allowing them to subdue multiple captives with a single net magazine without harming their quarry beyond the restorative capacities of rudimentary med-bay facilities most slavers kept aboard their ships.

From what Samuel had heard, the sort of clientele who were in the market for slaves were usually not concerned with cosmetic damage, only that the assets could perform their duties, whatever those might be.

As the slaver's trajectory brought him arcing over Samuel's position the marine opened fire, this time scoring at least one solid hit. The rounds didn't manage to punch through the operative's armor, though the impact was enough to skew the slaver's aim, the salvo of pistol rounds from his fast-drawn, off hand weapon raking the heat vent instead of the marine.

Samuel cursed aloud and kept firing, choosing to ignore the fact that the recoil from his shots had pushed him away from the heating vent and upwards from the hull. Several more rounds knocked deep scores in the slaver's armor, though the enemy dropsuit held, despite the fact that now the slaver was listing due to one of his thrusters being damaged.

Samuel stopped firing and reached out for the communications array he was drifting toward and managed to keep himself from flying off into the void of space. The slaver had also begun to right himself.

Several rounds impacted against the hull and both the slaver and Samuel saw Claudius and Bianca bearing down on the hostile operative. The two marines exchanged fire with the slaver as he compensated for his damaged thruster by kicking off the hull and firing with both his trap-caster and his sidearm.

Either Claudius or Bianca managed to hit the slaver in the faceplate as the three combatants soared within close range of each other, but not before the slaver launched a net across Bianca's position. The veteran marine managed to twist most of her body away from the net just as it blossomed, though two of the barbs slammed into her cybernetic leg. There was no pain to speak of, but Bianca was now tangled up in the net. She discarded her rifle and slashed madly

with her boarding knife at the netting. The gears of the net were grinding closed, though the razor-sharp edge of the boarding knife managed to cut through enough of the mesh that within several seconds the trap closed without her in it as she cut the net away from the barbs and left them stuck in her leg.

Samuel was only distantly aware of Bianca's struggle, as he watched the sickening display of battle physics unfold between Claudius and the slaver. In the furious exchange of fire that had resulted in the slaver's faceplate being shot out, so too, had Claudius taken several rounds from the slaver's sidearm.

The marine's limp body sailed out and away from the frigate, its momentum only moderately slowed by the bullet impacts. A steady stream of bright red ice crystals flowed from him as his last heartbeats vented precious life fluids into hard vacuum. The armored form of Claudius faded into the clutter of the debris storm as the dead slaver slammed into the hull and began a lazy red drift further aft. Holland sped past the whole engagement and Samuel could see that the medic was shooting aft.

"Hyst, on your right!" came the voice of Spencer Green, from Squad Ulanti, and seconds later the marine's body slammed into Samuel's, sending both of them careening back over the hull near where Jada had been pinned. Samuel ended up soaring backwards and saw that another net projectile had barely missed him thanks to Spencer's keen eye and quick reaction.

The rest of Squad Ulanti appeared over the spinward horizon of the frigate as they exchanged fire with another slaver who appeared to be on the run. Ahead of the slaver engaging Squad Ulanti were two more operatives dragging what Samuel could only think of as some kind of oxygen cage. It was a cube with metal edges and orange plexi-glass walls, and within it was at least eight or nine human bodies, all prone and stacked in the cube like corpses on a casualty truck.

Most of them were encased in nets from the trap-casters, though one or two seemed to be bound hand and foot by simple zip-ties. The marine had to begrudgingly give it to the slavers; they were efficient and effective at their chosen profession. As had been the plan with the engineers for the Reapers, it was likely that the slavers had targeted the Journeyman and Master Class rating engine crew, only, unlike the marines, had probably just killed everyone else.

"*Everybody move up!"* shouted Boss Ulanti, her voice having taken a feral edge since last Samuel had heard it, "*We're taking that ship!"*

Samuel was happy to see that Squad Ulanti appeared to have avoided suffering any casualties, and as he and Spencer righted themselves and prepared to kick off the marine could see that Abasi Hondo was using his boarding knife to cut Jada free.

Hondo was an exceptional soldier, in Samuel's estimation, and not just because he was from an immigrant family of Errolites. Most people from Errol either remained on their home world or, like the warrior, Imago, left it only to become mercenaries of one allegiance or another. Granted, being a Reaper was in its own way, a kind of merc lifestyle, but doing so as a life-bonded Grotto citizen was something else entirely.

Abasi's family had, for reasons he had chosen not to share, expatriated from Augur Corporation and joined Grotto. The marine's former platoon had been liquidated after the initial engagement with the enemy they now knew as the Gedra, and both Boss Ulanti and Boss Marsters had fought to keep him in Tango Platoon.

There were many platoons that had to be liquidated after crossing the Ellisian Line, though Samuel suspected that his former squad leader Soren Aiken, who rapidly ascended to a position of power within Reaper Command, had pressed the matter. The marine swiftly cut away Jada's bonds and got her to her feet in time for her and Abasi to join Samuel and Spencer as they formed a second wave of marines to follow after Boss Ulanti and her group.

That was how it worked with the Reapers, thought Samuel as he took stock of how fluidly individual marines moved in and out of squads. He knew that if a call went over the wire for Squad Hyst to break off the attack and assist elsewhere it would be Spencer, Bianca, Jada, and Abasi who would follow him. Holland was, for the time being, now part of Squad Ulanti, even as Ben and Marcus had remained in the service chamber as part of the new Squad Marsters. Each Boss functioned like their own gravity well, and the rank and file marines moved in and out of orbit as needed. They would always reset when given the chance, and the usual faces would return to his command, though in the moment, it was the Boss that made the squad. Squad Hyst formed up and kicked off on the heels of Boss Ulanti and her hasty assault on the slave cutter.

AS they approached the cage the rearguard operative drew a fully-automatic sidearm, equipped with foregrip stabilizer and an extended magazine. It was just the sort of weapon that would be devastatingly effective in the close confines of shipboard fighting. Thankfully, it was less so in the vast expanse of the hull surface, though as the slaver sprayed rounds in a wide arc towards the oncoming marines it forced the Reapers to adjust all the same.

Boss Ulanti and Gretchen both seemed to have taken at least glancing blows from the operative's salvo, though Joseph Candor and Holland continued unabated. Joseph sacrificed his trajectory in order to lay down suppressing fire that drove the operative behind one of the many gravity ballasts in this section of the ship. The operative was

swift in reloading his weapon, as Samuel and his wave could see while they came up on his left flank.

Like Samuel and the rest of the marines, the slaver operative was a professional soldier, even if his loyalties lay with an otherwise dubious cartel of small slaver operations. The man would not be able to spend his considerable paycheck if he was dead, and it was clear that he was not inclined to make a heroic last stand against nine determined Reapers.

Just before Samuel and the others reached a good firing angle the operative ignited his thrusters, blasting backwards toward the cutter, his weapon giving a significant boost to his velocity as he once again swept the arc of fire wide so he could strafe both of the advancing marine squads.

As before the tactic successfully held the marines at bay, since most of them had to scramble to either find cover or swoop out of the cone of fire. The small caliber rounds were not powerful enough, generally, to punch through the marine combat armor, though the impacts were painful and disorienting, not to mention there was still the off-chance of a direct hit on one of the natural weak points in the armor at the joints.

“Push forward marines!” growled Boss Ulanti as she recovered her footing and kicked off again in pursuit.

It was clear that the slavers had not expected the marines to give chase with such dogged determination. The gunner could be seen gesturing wildly to his comrades as he pointed back at the oncoming marines.

One slaver continued to haul the oxygen cage toward the ship. The bay doors opened and a small platform descended, carrying two more shooters with actual combat rifles, to meet the woman and her cargo. The other two slavers joined the first and together the three of them turned to face the marines.

“They’ll try to hold us off until the cage is aboard,” said Boss Ulanti as she raised her rifle and snapped off several rounds, her bullets driving the slavers into cover behind several more gravity ballasts.

“They sure picked a great spot to defend,” admitted Gretchen Voss begrudgingly, one of the veteran marines rotated into Tango Platoon after her platoon was liquidated in an engagement several months ago. She held her assault shotgun close to her chest and threaded her way between two of the ballast points.

“Boss we aren’t going to get past these guys in time,” agreed Bianca as she caught up to Samuel. The two of them fired repeated shots at one of the operative to drive him out from his cover.

“The cage is already being clamped in,” observed Abasi as he added his fire to theirs, using their bullets to chase the slaver directly into a crossfire from Boss Ulanti, Joseph, and Holland, leaving the operative a bloody corpse drifting just above the hull.

“Sek, Green, and Hondo, advance to support Voss, we have a better angle of approach than Ulanti,” Samuel ordered quickly as he watched Boss Ulanti, Joseph, and Holland exchange barrages with the remaining slavers. They were unable to advance without being gunned down now that the operatives had solidified their position despite the loss of one of their own. “Kade, let’s clip to a hardpoint so we can get higher and fire from overwatch.”

“If you’re unable to recover the assets, your secondary objective is to ensure that the slavers walk away empty handed,” came the voice of Boss Marsters crackling over the com-beads, the usual flat tone of his voice garbled and made all the more menacing by the ambient interference, “How copy?”

“Good copy,” snapped Boss Ulanti just before being sprayed with small arms fire from the slaver as he sped across the marine line on a diagonal trajectory. Several of the rounds pierced her armor and instantly she was screaming in pain as the vacuum of space pulled against her wounded flesh.

Seconds later Holland slammed into her shuddering body and pinned her hard against a gravity ballast, ignoring the battle raging around him.

“*Boss down! Boss down!”* shouted Holland as he executed a standard battle drill of broadcasting the alert through the task force channel, “*Ulanti down!”*

From Samuel’s vantage point he could see the medic hastily slapping adhesive plugs and spraying pressurized sealant over the holes in Boss Ulanti’s armor. He had gone through something similar several months ago after being shot in the leg during a skirmish with armed scavengers aboard a small gaseous mining station. The bandages had stopped the bleeding and the sealant kept hard vacuum from sucking one’s body out through the bullet hole, but the entire process was incredibly painful. Once there was time to be attended to in a med-bay the armor with the sealant usually had to be cut away from the body, then the fused plug and sealant surgically removed, leaving a messy network of scar tissue around the wounded area. It was better than dying, but in those moments of excruciating pain it seemed to him a small improvement.

Samuel tore his gaze from them and returned to the battle at hand. As Gretchen had done, Jada, Spencer, and Abasi were slowly and steadily working their way into the tight network of gravity ballasts.

Samuel and Bianca had tethered themselves with their clips and cables to what looked like some kind of tow mooring, which had given them the opportunity to fire without drifting too far from the fighting. They had to rely heavily on their rifle training. The volume of fire required to keep the two rifle carrying slavers adequately engaged while also suppressing offensive tactics from the slavers in the maze of gravity ballasts emptied the marine's magazines quickly despite being set on semi-automatic.

"We can't keep this up, Prybar," said Bianca as she fired a final round before the gun clicked empty and she reached for what appeared to be the last of her magazines. "No way we can win this, we have to back off or they'll pick us apart."

The two slavers in the ballast maze had managed to slip out of sight. As Samuel scanned the battle space for their position, Spencer's body was suddenly flung backwards. In the blink of an eye the veteran marine was pinned to the wall of a ballast, his body encased in the tightening net projectile.

Samuel re-trained his rifle. He could see the slaver with the trap-caster using his thrusters to slide to the far right, as if he intended to skirt the edge of the maze and flee in a wide circle back to the cutter.

As that one fled, the other gunner emerged from a blind corner on the opposite side of the ballast and emptied one of his extended magazines into Spencer's body. At point blank range the small arms fire tore the veteran marine's body to pieces.

In less than two seconds one of Samuel's closest friends and comrades, a veteran marine of over six years, was reduced to rapidly freezing chunks of meat.

Samuel's lungs seized up, and he floated in a state of mental and emotional shock. Spencer Green, brother to Paul Green, uncle to Heather and Vanessa Green, who had been covering the life-bond payments of his brother so that Paul could use the savings to one day buy a professional education license for whichever of the girls could pass the aptitude exams, was dead. Perhaps his death meant that both girls would have the opportunity, Samuel couldn't stop himself thinking as his grip on his rifle loosened and he watched the cloud of bright red particles expand outwards from what used to be his friend.

"Voss, hostile on your right, two points up, we're going to push him towards you," said Bianca from her position next to Samuel as she looked down her sights and began firing at the fleeing slaver with the trap-caster.

"Got him," Gretchen's replied. The deep thudding reverberations of the marine's assault shotgun snapped Samuel out of his shock. He gasped with a surge of adrenaline as he turned to see that the shotgun had turned the slaver operative into an equally gory cloud of pieces.

“Boss,” said Bianca as she turned to Samuel. When he did not respond, she pulled on the cable he was clipped to and they bounced into each other as the remaining marines exchanged fire with the operatives in the background. “Samuel, we have to end this.”

Samuel shook his head and snapped himself back into focus, finding himself in Bianca’s concerned expression. His grip on his rifle tightened with renewed awareness.

“Liquidate the assets,” said Samuel in a grim tone, and he turned to raise his rifle to his shoulder. “Kade, target the plexi-glass, and ignore the slavers.”

The two marines took careful aim, ignoring the firefight raging between the advancing marines in the ballast maze and the remaining slavers. Samuel breathed deeply as he looked down his sights at the orange glass of the oxygen cage. It was finally secure, and the slavers looked as if they were about to hoist it up into the belly of the cutter.

He squeezed the trigger once, twice, then three times and watched as each successive round caused the glass to splinter and crack more. Bianca added her fire to his and the oxygen cage suddenly burst apart and depressurized, venting bodies and atmosphere into hard vacuum. Samuel knew the captives would freeze and asphyxiate within seconds in the harsh void of space. The slavers, their booty gone, were already rushing to make their getaway.

Without anything of value to fight over, both the marines and slavers quickly disengaged and backed away from their enemy.

The cutter retracted its moorings and fired port thrusters to liftoff. Within minutes it was just another spec of light in the vast starscape of space.

Samuel un-clipped himself and made his way down to Spencer’s remains and managed to find the man’s ID tag as the rest of the marines policed up their gear. The squad leader turned away from the remains and looked across the hull, taking in the sight of the planet below and the floating debris of the battle suspended in the mild gravitational field of the frigate. It was only then that Samuel remembered he was wearing the vid-recorder, and it finally dawned on him what story Virginia was hoping to capture.

3. TANGO PLATOON

The cantina was thick with bodies as marines from nearly every platoon politely, but forcefully pushed and shoved their way into the modest room. It was always like this after a hostile salvage.

Samuel leaned back in his chair and sipped at the strong liquor in his glass. Tales of war and glory circulated in the customary fashion, and as had often been the case over the years, it was Tango Platoon that held the spotlight of the evening.

Samuel could overhear a marine from Lamda talking to two others from Epsilon about how Boss Marsters had used a suicide chute, of all things, to evacuate human assets recovered from the frigate.

“After they inflated the chute Marsters had his boys cut slits in it so that the assets could be dragged up through it on a cable,” said the Lamda marine, “Those folks didn’t have void suits, so it was the only way to get em out. I’d have never thought of something crazy like that. From what I heard they recovered twenty or so Helion engineers and tech ratings.”

Samuel took another sip of his drink and shifted his attention to a group of marines from several other platoons discussing the Tasca slave cartel.

It had been roughly ten hours since the last of the scrap wagons had returned from the debris storm, and the situation had deepened in its complexity. The initial salvage runs had been successful and each of the wagons that had been deployed returned with their cargo bays filled to the brim with valuable materials. Now that the high value targets had been seized from the battlefield, more measured and broad spectrum salvage operations had begun.

The Reapers had driven off the slavers, and by some miracle, no other scavengers had appeared to contest the claim. Usually there were at least a few small craft that attempted to swoop in and fill their bellies on salvage even as the Grotto forces loomed over the claim. These were desperate times, however, and no scavenger ship would dare cross the Ellisian Line unless they were either confident in their skills and equipment or desperate enough to risk everything.

The general consensus was that the presence of the slave cutter combined with the scrap wagons and Grotto fleet presented enough stiff competition that whatever carrion ships might be out there lurking, had chosen to either flee the scene or continue to hide and wait it out. It was unlikely that the Grotto fleet would leave anything behind them, that much Samuel knew. Once the fleet had taken what it wanted from the site, a security picket would be set until one or

more of the Hive fleets that plodded along in the wake of the battle fleets happened along. While the Hive fleets could consume and process much more tonnage than the combat craft of the battle force, they were slow about doing so and it was likely that whatever Hive responded would spend weeks or even months picking through the debris storm. By then the battle fleet would be long gone and fighting over the next claim.

Battle Fleet Baen was spinning up to make its way deeper into Ellisian space, supposedly to press the already wounded Helion forces. The enemy may have retreated, but Command was intent on keeping the enemy on a defensive footing.

In the past it would have been protocol for the Reapers to stay behind and finish the salvage, especially considering the various competitors for the claim. However, more and more the Reapers were being used to support front line activities, and Samuel wasn't the only one to have noticed just how close to the real action the marines were coming. If left with one or two battle craft as a security escort the marines and tech crew of the Baen Reaper tug would have been able to expertly salvage the site on their own.

The hive fleet, once it finally arrived, was best suited to the heavy scrap recovery and mass cargo storage. Somewhere up the chain of Command either a high rated bureaucratic or perhaps even one of the military actuaries had determined that the Bottom Line was best served by using the Reapers more as combat troops with salvage experience than it was to use them as salvage experts with combat experience.

The shift in their scope of duty was subtle, but Samuel suspected that the longer the war ground on, the more commonplace such missions as Tetra Prime would become. The more he brooded on the topic the more he wondered how long it would be before Reapers were being used as shock troops in ship-to-ship conflicts during the void battles, instead of snatching up the choice scrap once the fighting was done. Everything was getting out of hand, he thought to himself, and there was no end in sight.

"The vid footage from the frigate would be very useful to Command," Samuel stated under his breath to Virginia Tillman just before taking a swallow of the amber liquid that flowed from his glass. "Maybe help them get a positive ID on the slavers, just in case they really were Tasca. If we have proof that the cartel is sending ships and operatives into Ellisian space then maybe they'll consider re-tasking some of the bond enforcers to handle the issue. Keeping this to ourselves seems a bit criminal. If you aren't going to share it why have me wear the rig in the first place?"

"You know as well as I do that bond skipping is at an all time

high, like the worst in Grotto's recorded history," answered Virginia quietly from her seat next to him as she sipped from her own strong beverage.

"After Helion started using merc warships to blockade Grotto, everyone who lives outside of the central systems is damn near on their own.

What's criminal is that poorly trained and more poorly paid cor sec staff are the only armed presence in non-central Grotto systems, which is half of Grotto space, dammit, everything else has been pulled back to the core or thrown across the Ellisian Line. People feel abandoned by the Board, but are still expected to do their part for the Bottom Line that they've been all but discarded by." Virginia snorted and knocked back the rest of her drink.

"More profit in converting bond skippers to penal laborers than fighting slavers and re-purposing the recovered assets," grumbled Samuel as his mood darkened. "Even with the ransom contracts they'd cash in on from the accredited corporate citizens, the cost of fighting the slavers would be just as high for the bond enforcers as it was for us. The Board won't commit military forces to engage the blockade until Helion starts using their own assets, right now it's just cheap pirate cutters and independent mercs working on privateer licenses." He glanced over at her. "You still haven't answered my question, why keep the vids to ourselves? It's not against the rules to record our work, but it is a Beta class felony to keep it to yourself."

"Alpha class felony if you distribute it," whispered Virginia as she looked at Samuel out of the corner of her eye, as if attempting to gauge his reaction without showing obvious concern about it. "People know that slavers are out there in the void, especially in necrospace, but what they don't know is just how sophisticated their operations can be. Maybe if people saw how elite some of these outfits can be, then less might skip their bonds."

"That's not all of it, Tillman," said Samuel, an edge creeping into his voice, "We haven't encountered hardcore slavers until now, and while I'm sure they've been out there in the black, it was just a confluence of events that put them here with us. This isn't about slavery, this is about your unionist movement, don't insult me by pretending it isn't."

"So if you knew, why the interrogation? You know I want this footage for the cause, so what's the point in asking me questions you already know the answer to?" demanded Virginia, her eyes flashing with the passion that had become something of a trademark during her brief stint as a rally speaker for the fledgling unionist movement.

"Spencer Green died today, and before that we wiped out a cadre of naval security staffers so that we could effectively kidnap a bunch

of engineer ratings. The vid caught the whole bloody affair," snapped Samuel as the alcohol started buzzing in the back of his head and his emotions began to get the better of him. "If you show this to anyone but Command then it will be an Alpha class felony. It's not like you to manipulate, to keep secrets. There's a narrative behind this, and I want to know what it is, or I won't help you anymore. I want to forget about what I saw today, not see it on newsfeeds over and over, and maybe end up in the brig for my trouble, unless the goal is worth it."

Virginia took a deep breath and finished her drink, only to have two more be set up on the table at a gesture and a thanks from Samuel. Now that he was Boss Hyst he, like the other squad leaders, didn't have to jostle his way back and forth from the bar to get a fresh drink. At first it had made Samuel uncomfortable, until he began to watch how Wynn Marsters would conduct himself in the cantina. He would never get drunk, though he would nurse several drinks throughout the night, and pleasantly thank whichever marine happened to refresh his table. It was a subtle kind of power exchange, and one that Wynn used to cultivate a sense of gratitude and service in his squad, even as he created a respectful distance from his own people. Wynn Marsters, like Lucinda Ulanti, and now Samuel Hyst, was a Boss, and as such nobody outside of his rank would ever truly be his friend. They were a breed apart, and seemingly subtle customs like those of the cantina served to reinforce their authority while cultivating the willingness in the others to follow them into danger.

"Tango Platoon is more than just fifteen salvage marines, Samuel," said Virginia as she looked across the cantina. "You mustered out and moved to Pier 16 before I solidified my position with the unionists. I started attending the sanctioned rallies, and it was shocking. We had these little fenced in areas where we were corralled by the enforcers, and once locked in our 'free speech zone' we were allowed to have our meetings. I knew from the start that there was no way our movement was going to accomplish anything from behind a cage."

"Those cages you're talking about are the only places the public is allowed to gather, outside of retail plazas and recreation parks," said Samuel, keenly aware of where the discussion was going, but intent upon making Virginia come clean with him, "Are you telling me that you joined the unionist underground? That's risky business, marine."

"Risk and reward, it's the Grotto way, that's what they taught us and that's what we've done. Look, Samuel, most of us are Grotto patriots, the unionist movement isn't about tearing down the corporation, it's about making our place within it more dignified and secure." Virginia paused to sip her drink, not wanting to make her exchange with Samuel look anything more than casual. "That's my

point, we fight and die for the corporation, whether that's on the battlefield or in the factory, and as human beings we should be compensated fairly for our contribution."

"So you want the right to engage in collective bargaining? This is about demanding a raise?" scoffed Samuel, his own Grotto indoctrination getting the better of him, as the very idea of collective bargaining had been deeply ingrained in his mind as something that only happened in other, lesser corporate societies.

"Boss, it's about raises, life-bonds, taxes, the penal system, education reform, it's about the soul of Grotto Corporation itself. It's about working and risking your life knowing that you and your family will be provided for.

This system is rigged against us from birth to death. I am a human being, not a human resource. Most people aren't like you Samuel, they want to live in their homeland, the answer for you might be the frontier, but for most of us the answer is re-shaping Grotto for the better. This is our corporation, and they have tried to disenfranchise us into believing that it belongs only to the elites." Virginia set her drink down and removed a small pic-viewer, which she handed to Samuel. He scrolled through the images of dirty factory workers and weary laborers from what seemed to be a multitude of time periods in contemporary and ancient history. "Labor unions and proletariat uprisings fail because those movements begin and end with the powerless," she continued.

"There's an old quote that says there are two kinds of people, those with loaded guns and those who dig. The citizens of Grotto do and dig as they are told, because who else but each other can they look to for inspiration, or to protect them when the enforcers kick in their doors and tell them it's back to work or pack up for the penal colony. You're thinking the same thing the elites and their enforcers are thinking when you see those pictures…these people, they aren't changing anything."

"Now look at *them*," said Virginia as she picked up her glass and gestured towards the men and women who filled the cantina. "They know what it's like to be the person who digs, but they also have loaded guns. Grotto is eating away at itself from the inside, and these people are the only ones who can save the corporation. If the marines side with the unionists, everything will change."

"A Reaper strike," breathed Samuel as his heart began pounding at the very thought of it, so insane an idea and yet it surged through his mind.

"The elites take us for granted because they know we need the money and the citizens have no idea what we really do because they're too busy making ends meet to become an informed populace,"

Virginia snarled with passion just before she pointed to Ben Takeda as the machine gunner wrapped an arm around the shoulder of a smiling Gretchen Voss. “I want to show them the truth about Reapers, about the war, about necrospace. Grotto Corporation can be something we are proud to be a part of, and that all starts with Tango Platoon.”

“Wynn won’t let you rig up the whole group, and if he finds out its being done under his nose he’s likely to turn you over to Command,” said Samuel.

“Right, and because of our military experience we’d immediately be mustered into a penal legion and end up fighting the same battles we would as Reapers, but without the paycheck,” Virginia replied with contempt. “I understand the irony and I understand the risks. I wouldn’t ask anyone to do something I wasn’t willing to do myself. We don’t need everybody, just one rig in each squad. Tango Platoon has been the tip of the spear for the Baen Reaper fleet since the founding. Command didn’t plan on it that way, but that’s how it’s played out. Our platoon wasn’t the only one to start out with hardcore veterans as squad leaders; they pulled Bosses from across Grotto space. For whatever reason, we rose up, we distinguished ourselves, and because of that, we keep getting pushed to the front of the duty line because talk of the tug is that Tango Platoon gets it done.”

“You’re talking about turning Tango Platoon into the rally point for a strike, and I respect that, Virginia, I really do.” Samuel paused and looked deeply into his glass as if the answer might be floating there. “Maybe it could work. We have a hell of a reputation, and if we crossed the picket line then plenty of other platoons would come with us, most of them if Boss Marsters was with us.” Samuel nodded, then swept his gaze across the room, giving his head a slow shake. “It just might work.”

“So you’ll keep the rig? Keep filming? That’s all I need from you right now. I’ll filter the footage back to my people using some black channels, another Alpha felony, I know, and they’ll use it to swell the union membership at home,” answered Virginia, actually flushing visibly from excitement. “The marines we bring into the fold by word of mouth, on the tug or in the field. Once we have enough members, and the moment is right, we cease fire and force Command to negotiate, maybe even get the attention of the Anointed Actuaries.”

“It is a solid plan, Tillman, and I wish you the absolute best with it, but I can’t help you. I want to, I really do,” Samuel said as he shifted uncomfortably in his seat while also catching sight of Boss Marsters as the veteran platoon leader entered the cantina. “I was happy to wear the rig once, and I hope you can salvage some good out of Spencer’s passing, and all the rest of the footage, but I’m giving it back, and don’t ask me to wear it again.” He leaned forward, elbows

on the table, and spoke without looking at her. “My family is waiting for me on Pier 16, and I’m no good to them locked up in the brig and stripped of my earnings. Thanks to the trade war declaration, I can’t even leave until either Helion or Grotto backs down, otherwise I’ll be categorized as a deserter and bond agents will drag me to a penal colony. I’m choosing to put my family before the corporation.”

“But your family is the corporation, it’s all part of the same interconnected socio-economic system,” Virginia fired back, not wanting to lose the momentum with Samuel that she seemed to think she’d gained. “With a synergy of union ideas and marine strength we can-”

Samuel cut her off. “I don’t want synergy. I want simple. I want the work of my hands and the rewards of the day. I want my family and to live my life without any person or institution telling me how it’s all going to be.” There was a growing edge to his voice, as if he was trying to convince himself as much as he was Virginia. “I will finish this war, and then I am taking my family as far from corporate space as I can get.”

Virginia sat back with a defeated sigh, looking away from Samuel for a moment, taking in the sight of more marines trying to pack themselves into the cantina.

Samuel finished his drink, took a deep breath and placed a hand gently on Virginia’s shoulder.

“You have my word that nothing we’ve said will leave this table. I wish you all the luck in the verse; I just can’t take the risk with you.”

Boss Marsters caught sight of the pair and began making his way through the crowd towards them, with Lucinda Ulanti only a few steps behind him.

“You always did have a pretty black and white attitude, Prybar,” Virginia said with a grim smile as she shook off the disappointment and prepared for the arrival of the two squad leaders.

“Marines,” said Boss Marsters as he and Boss Ulanti joined Virginia and Samuel at the small table.

By the time the two leaders settled into their seats fresh drinks had arrived for Marsters, Ulanti, and Hyst.

With that many ranked marines at the table many onlookers had started to pay attention, and Samuel did have to begrudgingly admit that Virginia had a point about Tango Platoon’s reputation. They were the only unit to engage hostile elements, or suffer casualties during the day’s salvage mission, which no doubt only furthered the unit’s reputation. The crowd in the cantina was a testament to the mutual respect and outright curiosity that the other marines held for the Reapers of Tango Platoon. Everyone on board the tug knew that a

founding veteran and a new, but distinguished marine had died out there today.

The sheer number of individuals present made Samuel wonder just how right Virginia might be, though he pushed the thought from his mind. He had been willing to use the vid rig for her once, and though he knew it was union related and had stupidly taken the risk based on their years of service together, he just couldn't bring himself to take that risk again. He would do much for his comrades in arms, more for those who had been at his side since the founding, even though that was a steadily dwindling number of people.

The cliché did seem true, that retired Reapers only had ghosts for friends. As if the Boss had been reading his mind, Wynn caught Samuel's eyes and nodded. Samuel nodded back, squared his shoulders and prepared himself for what was came next.

In the years that Samuel had served for Wynn Marsters the platoon leader had never once performed the early retirement ritual. Generally, that was something he pushed off on Boss Ulanti, or Boss Taggart in her time, even Boss Aiden. Samuel had always wondered about that peculiarity in the man, who was an otherwise staunch example of everything a pitiless and battle-hardened Reaper should be.

Samuel stood.

The hustle and bustle of the crowd came to a gradual halt and within a few moments everyone in the room was paying rapt attention to the standing squad leader.

"I speak for Tango Platoon," Samuel said, raising his glass high. "Tonight, we drink to the early retirement of Claudius Jaeger and Spencer Green. They stood by our sides and paid the price so we didn't have to."

"This is the job," resounded the voices of every marine in the room.

"One for the Stalker in the Dark," whispered Boss Ulanti as she tipped a second glass over her shoulder.

4. SWAMP BASE

The rivers and lakes of algae soup that covered the surface guaranteed that the atmosphere was humid and sticky on this world.

Samuel sat astride one of the eighteen hastily constructed flat-bottom boats that skidded across the shallow waters, propelled by large electric fan blades mounted on the stern. Ninety marines seemed to Samuel like a large force to deploy for the purpose of taking a remote factory complex, considering what Tango Platoon had done on its own since his time in the Reaper corps. However, he knew that it was likely Reaper Command wanted to wrap this salvage up as quickly as possible so that the Baen tug could return to the main battle fleet.

In Samuel's opinion, one shared by most of the other marines, Reaper Command had grown too fond of open war and perhaps had begun forgetting their place. The Reaper Corps was a salvage army, consisting of hardened manual labor specialists who also had military training. They were neither trained nor equipped for the kind of full-scale military operations being executed by the battle fleet. Reaper Command increasingly seemed to chafe against that reality, and pushed the marines closer and closer to the front lines.

Everyone knew that it was only a matter of time before the events of Tetra Prime were played out all over again, and the marines would be sent into the thick of real war alongside Grotto storm troopers and the elite warriors of the Merchants Militant. Even in Reaper Command there were those individuals who sought glory and riches outside their station, and would willingly sacrifice the lives of the marines in order to climb another rung in the corporate ladder.

There was little doubt in Samuel's mind that Command wanted this operation wrapped up as soon as possible so they could get back into what they considered the real war. For his part, Samuel was actually looking forward to slinging his rifle and sparking a cutting torch, as he was making hazard wages either way and scrap metal typically didn't shoot back.

The small planetary body, designated UK2060 was little more than a moon that moved in a high orbit around one of the dying suns that populated Ellisian space. While the main Grotto battle force engaged Helion armies in massive void and ground campaigns over control of the two beta class planets, the Baen Reaper tug had been sent to this distant body.

According to the shift manager's briefing, long-range sensors had picked up what appeared to be mining activity on the surface. It had been noticed by both Helion and Grotto that only the tomb-worlds

were plagued with the heavy atmospheric conditions that prevented remote scans of the surface, a fact which had heavily affected how the front line had structured itself. The overall stratagem of each corporation was to quarantine the tomb-worlds while active conquest of the other planets and satellites could continue.

Most of the other planetary bodies appeared to be nothing more than wasteland worlds, stripped of much of their natural resources. However, as more surveyors and engineers were brought to the surface of claimed planets, both corporations had made a peculiar and radically profitable discovery. The technology of the machine race was still an enigma for the scientists of corporate space. The energy reactive and unbelievably hard substance that the tomb-world buildings were made from still defied scientific investigation.

No torch or blade could cut the substance, and when the material was not activated by the gun spiders it was of sufficient weight and density that dismantling or otherwise salvaging the buildings was thus far impossible. The gun spiders, once damaged enough to render them combat ineffective had also eluded any sort of reverse engineering. Their corpses had yielded no insight into the machine race beyond the fact that they did have an organic component in the form of a brainlike organ that moved electrical impulses throughout the creature's body. Grotto had also been unable to determine how exactly the giant tyrant machine creature had managed to reanimate the shattered bodies of the penal legionnaires. With so many unanswered questions and no functional way to realize an immediate profit, the cost of military expeditions into the dead cities was unjustifiable.

After several bloody engagements, Reaper Command had ordered a cordon and picket of any tomb-world, and the focus of the various Grotto battle fleets had become focused on laying claim to the wasteland worlds.

Helion had seemingly come to the same conclusion, and they too created cordons and pickets anytime they managed to out-fight Grotto forces for orbital dominance around the tomb-worlds. Both corporations were massively over-extended and when two mighty organizations engaged in trade war on such an epic scale, the costs mounted swiftly and the Boards demanded a profit margin.

It was when massive deposits of nefadrite ore, mordite gas, and ink-rock were found on some of the planets that the war intensified beyond anyone's imagination. It was clear that the machine race, or whoever built them, were utilizing an entirely alien system of technology and raw materials. Common materials such as zinc, iron, copper, and xaxos had been stripped away from the planets. This massive harvesting combined with apocalyptic levels of planetary desiccation had created seemingly lifeless worlds, and yet each was

one rich in various materials that were vital to the maintenance and expansion of corporate industry and technology.

Both Helion and Grotto seemed to realize that it was only a matter of time before other corporations would learn of the vast wealth just waiting to be prised from the dead planets, so both corporations were rushing to stake their claim.

The war played out in a grisly spectacle of void battles for control of tomb-worlds and brutal ground campaigns for control of everything else. Neither force seemed interested in fighting each other and the machine race simultaneously, so for the time being most of the tomb-worlds were fought over as points on a star chart.

So far, the Reapers had only been employed in the scrap wagon sorties, even if they increased in number and threat level, the salvage marines had yet to be sent directly into the teeth of combat on the front lines. Such hellish warfare was the purview of the hereditary stormtroopers of the various elite Houses, vassals of the corporate nobility of Grotto society.

They were born into military life and had the best in training and equipment. While a single stormtrooper was still no match in skill or equipment for the average Merchants Militant contractor, their unwavering loyalty to the corporation and dedication to the glory of their respective Houses made them fearsome foes.

Most Grotto battle forces were comprised of several battalions of stormtroopers, with small units of Merchants Militant contractors present as high end specialists. Samuel, and most of the other marines, knew that all it would take was a decimal point shift on the fleet's balance sheet to press Reaper Command into putting marines on the ground. Even so, the marines were happy to be planetside on what they all hoped would be a non-combat salvage, though no one expected it to be that easy.

"Hey, Boss," said Marcus, as he held up his data-pad "Water sample came back from the lab. Support techs say that this stuff is edible once you filter out the minerals and strain the water. Command thinks the complex we're heading toward might not be a mining facility at all, more like a food processing plant."

Ben Takeda heard this and reached his arm out of the boat to dip his hand in the water, causing a splash due to the speed of the vessel. When he brought his gloved hand back up out of the water he had a fistful of green muck that clung to his glove in ropey strands. He held it up to the rest of Squad Hyst, all of whom stared at him blankly.

"I'm making a disgusted face," crackled Ben in the digitized voice of his grim visage.

Bianca burst out laughing as she piloted the boat through the murky haze that hung just above the water's surface. The pilot's laugh

was echoed by the digital wheezing noise that passed for laughter from Takeda.

The flood plain was treacherous. Reefs and pillars wreathed in a thick haze rising from the water and invisible until a few seconds before impact. The large deck lights helped to a degree, and so far none of the boats had suffered an impact.

“Marcus, did they give any indication as to who this complex might have belonged to?” asked Samuel as his eyes scanned the haze. “If this whole planetoid is covered in potential foodstuffs then there ought to be dozens of processing plants out here, so it can’t be Helion.”

“Negative Boss, they say unknown loyalty, possible Wageri pattern complex, eighty percent certainty,” reported Marcus as he consulted the data-pad, “Could be a free-wrench operation. Grotto and Helion both were issuing licenses like candy at the start of the war, maybe a Red List community?”

“At least we have gravity for this op,” said Holland from his seat in the middle of the boat. “And we had a luxurious eighteen hours to build our boats, so if we sink I guess it’s our own fault.”

Like the scrap wagons, the simple and brutal stratagem was to construct makeshift craft that could move through the terrain, armored as well as they could be without sacrificing too much maneuverability and hopefully get them where they needed to go still alive.

Samuel was proud of the vessel that Squad Hyst had created, though he could not help but harbor a degree of resentment toward Command and Grotto for not using some of the much-discussed profits to purchase the Reapers equipment to suit the mission. Maybe Tillman’s union wasn’t such a bad idea, thought Samuel as he took stock of the boat. Collective bargaining might be just the sort of thing to yield them proper vehicles.

The group fell silent after that and let the wind whip around them as they sped onwards. They had been starborne for months now, spending all of their time aboard the tug or deployed with the scrap wagons, and all of them were happy to finally be planetside. For over a year their war had been one waged in zero gravity, amidst the debris of void battles, fighting over scraps against lesser scavengers.

The feel of natural air-flow and planetary gravity was something they had missed deeply, as if their very biology had begun to crave atmosphere and solid ground. That was what they had evolved to be, planetside creatures, not starborne beings, thought Samuel to himself, and perhaps that’s where the space dementia phenomenon came from. Regardless of why, the marine was happy to be out of the void and planetside, even if that meant that in fifteen minutes when they

reached the processing planet he could be under fire by hostile elements.

After a few more minutes several lights appeared on the murky horizon, and soon the outline of a sprawling factory complex could be seen looming out of the haze.

Samuel had known from the mission briefing that this would be a lighting fast beachhead action, with the boats hitting max speed and rushing the complex. It was a bold move, and while not one Samuel relished, the terrain offered little choice. Had the Reapers been equipped with dropsuits and a launch craft then perhaps they could have engaged that way, though as usual, the marines were put into a position where the most cost effective and blunt method was chosen by Command.

The squad leader was shaken from his thoughts as several gun emplacements opened up from the complex and began to pepper the oncoming marines with hard rounds. By his count there were at least three hostile weapons spitting bullets at the assault force, though in the gloom it was difficult to be sure.

“Lights out!” snapped the voice of Boss Marsters through the com-bead, “Pilots take your chances with obstacles. I don’t want to lose half our number before we’ve taken the beachhead.”

Immediately, Marcus and Ben shut off the deck lights, and Bianca worked the stick as best she could while grinding her teeth in concentration. The boat pilot narrowly missed a large rock outcropping, though the tactic did seem to confuse the gunners defending the complex.

Samuel could now see four separate gun emplacements firing wildly into the fog that clung to the surface of the swamp. The engines of the assault craft still gave throaty growls as the boats churned through the water, and the marine knew that even if they’d run dark for the entire approach the enemy would have known they were coming. At least they’d been able to avoid many of the potentially fatal obstacles as they drew near the complex which was now less than one hundred meters between the first wave of craft and the beachhead.

“Shouldn’t they still be able to see us?” asked Ben as he prepared his own firearm for action. “Most crew served weapons have some kind of target sensor. This fog shouldn’t reduce their accuracy all that much.”

“Low tech, small caliber machine guns,” observed Marcus as he held onto the railing of the boat, which helped keep him from falling overboard as Bianca swerved once more to keep the vessel from smacking into another rock outcropping. “There’s no way an operation with the kind of money to cross the Line and build a complex of this

size is going to bring those without a reason."

"We'll find out soon enough, get ready marines," said Samuel in a low commanding tone as the fog began to clear and the beachhead and much of the complex became visible.

Samuel could hear over the task force channel that not all of the marine vessels had gotten this close to the target unscathed. One boat from Epsilon Platoon had smashed into an outcropping and flung its passengers in multiple directions into the brackish water. Two other craft had reported minor injuries from the hail of bullets, though so far, no deaths. As the fog cleared completely, Samuel could see that Tango Platoon was in the lead and looked to hit the beach first. He felt a simultaneous swell of pride and a grim weight of certainty that the platoon would suffer for it.

Now that they were not obscured by the haze, the gunners on the complex embankments were able to find more accurate firing solutions, and the rain of projectiles began to fall in earnest.

"Flak boards up and prepare to disembark!" ordered Boss Marsters as his squad's boat appeared to Samuel's right and sped up to take the lead. "Assault pattern phalanx! Pilots hit the surf and stay hull down until we clear the objective!"

Without hesitation the marines of Squad Hyst gripped the flak boards they'd stacked across the middle of the boat and held them like shields to cover both themselves and partially the person next to them. After the battle in deepspire, Boss Marsters had developed several tactical maneuvers involving the marines using flak boards in the same manner as ancient warriors from the histories. The platoon leader had used the tech staff to plumb the Grotto historical database for images of primitive warriors, and though what they could find was little more than artistic renditions on clay pots or stucco walls, it seemed that now such an unorthodox approach would prove useful.

Samuel looked out from behind his flak board and saw the beach rushing to meet them. Now that they were close he could see that the grimy wet sand was strewn with loose bones and bizarre skeletons that looked as if they belonged to lizards or fish perhaps. Another round impacted against his board and the marine shook the sight from his mind, his combat awareness overlooking the implications of the bones and cataloging them as obstacles to proper footing once the marines landed.

The flak boards shuddered from the continuous impact of enemy fire, and some of the boards were already showing signs that they might crack under the withering salvos. The enemy might be using low tech guns, but the sheer volume of fire they were hurling at the marines was punishing. Once they reached a range suitable for the heavy machine gunners, both Harold and Ben stood up in their

respective boats.

Each of the gunners was using his retractable belt clip to help him stand steady, with the added resistance of other marines bracing them with their backs. Ben and Harold opened up with their own guns in response to the enemy, and the effect was immediate.

The Grotto heavy machine guns were also low tech, unequipped with the kind of target finders and recoil suppressors that more sophisticated contractors or Helion troopers used. However, the Reaper heavies were notorious for their impact velocity, and even if they didn't pierce the thick armor that some enemies wore, the bullets would knock a dent in just about anything.

The two veteran machine gunners strafed the four gun emplacements with swift bursts of fire, and soon there were only three emplacements that were capable of returning fire. Seconds later, Epsilon Platoon's remaining two craft entered the fray and their gunner lent her fire to the exchange, followed soon thereafter by gunners from Omicron and Sigma platoons.

By the time Squad Hyst's boat rammed its prow into the beach only one of the enemy guns was still firing. Bullets smacked into the flak boards of the squad as they leapt out of the boat and onto the wet sands of the beach. In seconds they had formed a phalanx of interlocking flak boards and were marching swiftly towards the complex ground floor bay.

Behind the squad, Bianca leapt off of the pilot's chair and into the shallow surf, narrowly avoiding getting stitched by hostile fire as the enemy gunner attempted to take advantage of her lack of defense.

Samuel turned to see that she was okay and saw the defiant marine already standing in water up to her chest and returning fire with her combat rifle. It was at that moment that Samuel saw the creature swimming up behind his former lover and suddenly all of the bones that littered the beach made a terrible sense.

The marine did not see clearly what exactly the creature was; all he could make out was a massive dorsal fin and several grasping appendages that looked like a cross between tentacles and claws.

Bianca never saw it coming. The thing hit her from behind and the marine went down face first into the water with the creature thrashing on top of her. Samuel screamed her name and broke rank to rush across the beach without the protection of his flak board, leaving himself exposed to enemy fire.

Suddenly, more of the creatures erupted from the shallow black waters and attacked the pilots who had been taking shelter in the water just behind the hulls of their boats. The complex defenders had managed to get one of the crew served weapons back online and now two of the gun emplacements sprayed the beachhead with small

caliber rounds.

Samuel's attention was focused on Bianca as she emerged from the water locked in a vicious struggle with the alien beast. The young woman had managed to get a firm grip on one of the creature's fins with her robotic arm and was visibly crushing it to a bloody pulp even as the creature's barbed appendages tore into her armor and the soft flesh beneath.

Samuel was a veteran of many conflicts, and despite his conscious focus on Bianca as he sprinted toward her, his unconscious mind was still aware of the greater struggle unfolding around him. Other marines fought in the churning water as more and more of the creatures burst from the water, perhaps drawn by the all of the activity.

The marine reached Bianca and the creature and flung himself into the fray with boarding knife in hand. The creature keened with an ear piercing shriek as Samuel slashed and stabbed at its surprising bulk, drawing a thick iridescent green blood that soon covered the two marines and stained the water around them. The creature abruptly ceased thrashingand sank limply into the water to drift away, either dead or dying. Samuel started dragging Bianca out of the water.

"My leg! Prybar, it did something to the servos, I can't move it!" groaned Bianca as she tried and failed to put weight on her robotic leg, which was now locked in a bent position, making it impossible for her to even use her hips to limp forward.

Samuel flung her arm over his shoulder and did his best to drag her toward the beach. Now that they were only in waist deep water more details filtered into his awareness. More of the creatures were arriving in the cove, and the Reaper assault had stalled out thanks to the chaos on the beach and in the water.

Multiple assault craft had pulled up short, unable to reach the landing zone and were now exchanging fire with not only the hostile gun emplacement but several dozen individual shooters who had emerged from within.

There was no way he was going to be able to drag Bianca onto dry land before more of the creatures were upon them, and even then, judging from the bones strewn across the beach, the creatures were likely to follow.

"Kade, take my rifle and keep them off us," said Samuel as he unslung his rifle and handed it to Bianca before changing his hold so that his arms were tucked under her armpits.

The disabled marine nodded her head and leaned into Samuel's grip, allowing him to drag her through the fetid water as she did her best to aim at the creatures rushing to overtake them.

Bianca was a solid shooter, one of the better marksmen in the

squad, and she laid down three round bursts as Samuel pulled her along. As Samuel worked his way towards the beach he began to suspect that this assault by the creatures must be a regular occurrence, based on the type and position of the gun emplacements.

Low tech weapons were the perfect fit for defending a kill zone being attacked by unintelligent beasts that swarmed *en masse*. The low tech guns could pour on the kind of meat-grinding firepower that it would take to hold off this kind of assault, where the more sophisticated weapons might find themselves overwhelmed in such a chaotic target rich environment.

The pair finally managed to reach the prow of the boat and Samuel set Bianca down before turning and drawing his sidearm. The fetid water swirled around his boots and made his footing precarious, so the marine took a knee to steady his aim and make each shot count. Samuel knew that to avoid being shot by the enemies above they had to stay where they could at least have the modest cover provided by the hull of the boat. Unfortunately, that meant they'd have to face down the amphibious hostiles up close and personal.

Bianca expended the last of Samuel's original magazine and then switched to her sidearm as the two marines held their position.

Unlike typical predators in nature, these creatures swarmed towards the beach in a frenzy, whereas a normal predator would typically not risk life and limb for a single meal.

"They must have landed this complex on a spawning ground or something!" shouted Samuel as he fired six rounds into a creature that emerged from the water only a few meters away.

"You'd think Command would have sent in some recon elements before launching a full frontal assault," grumbled Bianca as she holstered her empty sidearm and fumbled to get a fresh magazine into Samuel's combat rifle.

"*Everything* is on the front line," said Samuel as he reloaded his weapon and surveyed the cove. The water still churned with boats, blood, bullets, and the occasional beast, but the intensity of the fighting had decreased significantly. "We're cheap soldiers anyway; they could sell the complex for scrap and still come out ahead."

"*Tango Platoon on me!"* boomed the voice of Boss Marsters, drawing Samuel's attention from the frothing water and back up the beach to where he saw Squad Marsters and Squad Hyst crowding around the ground level bay doors.

Other squads of marines, mostly from Epsilon, Omicron, and Sigma were beginning to form up and advance now that the fury of the aquatic swarm had all but abated. The other platoons that were unable to land effectively had drawn most of the fire from the hostile defenders, and thankfully, the superior firepower and marksmanship

of the marines was turning the tide.

Samuel saw that Squad Ulanti was forming up nearby and the marine looked back to Bianca, who was already eyeing the phalanx with a look of disappointment.

“Well, Boss, you heard the man,” snarled Bianca as she handed Samuel his rifle back and swiftly drew and reloaded her sidearm. “I’ve got two pistol mags left, and I think these fish bastards have had enough for now, I’ll be fine.”

Samuel hesitated before Bianca looked away and back towards the cove, then drew his legs underneath him and launched himself into a sprint across the dozen or so meters of no man’s land between his position and the advancing Reaper phalanx.

Samuel knew it was a risk to advance without cover across the open beach, though with the marine’s still on boats in the cove laying down a tremendous amount of suppressing fire there were only a handful of hostile shooters who dared engage. Most of the defenders had either been killed or driven back inside the complex, though the few that remained continued to shoot at the exposed marines.

As Samuel ran, he could see a handful of armored marine corpses who had died in the blistering assault, and there was no telling how many had been drug down into a wet grave by the alien beasts. Errant rounds kicked up sand as one or more of the shooters above trained their guns on Samuel, and the marine cut side to side in an attempt to prevent the shooters from anticipating his next move. Ahead Samuel saw a flak board lying next to the corpse of a marine and dove for the handle. Samuel hauled up the board just in time to protect himself from several rounds. When he looked down at the fallen marine he recognized Marcus Baen. The dead marine had been brought down by several shots, and his armor was dented all over, as if he’d been brought down by sustained fire from one of the crew served weapons.

Samuel looked down at Marcus for a moment longer, feeling the sting of losing one of his marines with the acuteness that only a leader could, then he rushed to join Boss Ulanti’s phalanx. Abasi saw him approaching and moved his board aside to give Samuel space to slot in, and once he had his board locked in the formation lumbered onward.

The level of enemy fire had dwindled to the occasional burst, though all the marines kept their boards in position as they pushed on. The difficult landing combined with the attack by the aquatic creatures and the complex defenders had nearly halted the Reaper attack all together, but as more and more squads advanced the momentum began to grow once more.

Squad Marsters had already cut the locks on the ground floor bay and plunged into the dark interior, Holland and Ben had been added

to their number. By the time Squad Ulanti entered the complex a running battle was already in progress as Squad Marsters rooted out clusters of defenders.

"Reapers break by twos and sweep the factory," said Boss Ulanti as the squad fanned out into what appeared to be a sprawling processing plant of some kind, though judging from the smell, Samuel guessed that the plant was indeed a food processor that turned the planet's algae into something resembling a meal. "Hondo you're with me."

Two other marines, a man and a woman who had replaced Spencer and Joseph, paired off and broke left as Boss Ulanti and Hondo pressed forward. Samuel turned to Gretchen, who nodded and moved to follow the marine as he broke right. The twin cough of Ben and Harold's heavy guns echoed through the factory floor, giving some indication as to just how huge the interior was.

To Samuel's eye, it looked as if the vast majority of the complex was actually comprised of this multi-leveled processing unit and contained little else beyond the rudimentary creature comforts the staff might need. Samuel turned on his gun light and swept his barrel back and forth as he moved through a series of conveyor belts that looked as if they'd gone without use or maintenance for some time, a detail that did not escape Gretchen's notice either.

"This place hasn't been operational for a while, Boss," observed the marine in a gravelly voice as she holstered her sidearm so that she could spark the pilot light on her flamer. "I worked in a packing plant for awhile before going Reaper, if you let belts like this sit idle they have to be entirely replaced."

"You're right, at Assemblage 23 back on Baen 6 my father told me they would keep the belts running during no-load phases just because it added more life to the parts," agreed Samuel as he began to get a stronger sense of what had happened here. "Running a plant like this, in contested space no less, would take a regular supply drop."

"Something went wrong here that's for sure," said Gretchen as she and Samuel moved among the rotting machinery. All the while sounds of sporadic shooting echoed throughout the complex.

Suddenly two men came running around a corner, both of them wearing workman's overalls. While neither of them was armed, the marines weren't taking any chances. Gretchen had hugged the edge of the corridor and remained unseen, though Samuel had been caught in the open.

Samuel raised his rifle to fire on them when an armored warrior came around the corner and opened fire on the two men. One was hurled forward by the fusillade of shots, his torso erupting with gory exit wounds. The second man flung himself to the ground after taking

a round in the meat of his thigh. Samuel and the armored man exchanged brief glances, each taking the other in, before snapping off rounds at each other as the marine dove for cover.

The armored man was definitely a mercenary of some kind, thought the marine as his mind sifted through the details with the alacrity borne of years of combat experience. Samuel landed hard, and was positive that he'd taken at least a few indirect hits on his shoulder and thigh. He rolled over and began scrambling back to his feet he caught Gretchen's eye and nodded.

Voss nodded and swung the muzzle of her flamer around the corner, hosing the narrow corridor with a gout of liquid flame. As the wounded workman screamed, the merc stumbled backwards while the flame cascaded across his armored body and engulfed the corridor in a storm of combustion. The combined sounds of the wall plates peeling, the body armor cracking, and the body fat of the two workmen sizzling were like a cross between grinding metal and a piece of meat cooking on a grill. Samuel was very glad his helmet had an environmental filtration system.

Voss used a standard marine issue flamer, just like George Tuck had before he was lost on Vorhold, though she was known to add a small vial of tacerine oil to her tank mix. The molecules in the tacerine bonded with the pressurized mixture of mordite gas and plant based bio-diesel to create a weapon that could vomit forth what amounted to a flaming gelatin. While her flamer only had half the range of the standard unit, the sticky flame was dramatically more effective in eliminating armored enemies because it burned longer, and hotter. It was a break with ordinance protocol, but in the year of war against both Helion and the machine race, the marines on the front line had learned more than one way to give themselves an advantage, and they would take what they could get.

The temperature in the factory floor was already rising from the sheer potency of the inferno raging in the corridor and thanks to the swampy environment the humidity was now stifling, forcing Samuel to key a defogger on his helmet.

"Tango Platoon be advised, we just witnessed an armored hostile, likely a contractor, gun down two of the presumed plant staffers," Samuel reported into his com-bead as he and Gretchen waited for the corridor to reach a minimal smolder before securing whatever lay beyond. "Observing lack of equipment maintenance and general state of disrepair."

"Roger, engaging hostiles now," responded Boss Ulanti, the sound of gunfire filling both the factory floor and the com channel as the man spoke. "Came across several non-com KIAs, looked like they were executed."

“Tango Leader, task force FRAGO issue, time now,” said Boss Marsters, his voice a flat and commanding tone on the task force channel, “Detain non-combatants when possible, lethal force reserved for threat level actual.”

“Copy,” came the response from dozens of marines on the channel, as Samuel and Gretchen pushed through the heated corridor and deeper into the complex.

When the two marines passed through a door that had been jammed open they could see several bodies of workmen who had presumably been executed. They proceeded up a flight of stairs and Samuel guessed that they would soon be able to exit onto the balcony level upon which the gun emplacements had been positioned.

The sound of gunfire on the balcony could still be heard, so Samuel very carefully eased the door open and peered into the area. The balcony was one long gangplank that was dotted with makeshift pillboxes; each one haphazardly welded together using sheet metal. The odd feature of the balcony was that the entire area, from the bottom of the safety railing to the top of the deck had been covered in mesh wire fencing and either zip-tied or spot welded into place. It certainly wasn’t the sort of defense that would keep out bullets, so Samuel guessed it might have had more to do with keeping the creatures away.

One of the gun emplacements was still active, and Samuel could see the bodies of dozens of the workmen sprawled out across the balcony deck. Most of them looked as if they’d been killed in the gunfight against the Reaper’s assault. It was obvious, though, that several had clearly been forced to kneel against the back wall and been shot in the head. Even as Samuel watched a workman with a bolt-action rifle dropped his weapon and attempted to flee, only to be shot in the back by another of the armored mercs.

“Looks like maybe these mercs were forcing the plant workers to fight us, maybe the creatures too,” said Samuel as he turned back to Gretchen, “I just watched them execute a staffer who tried to stop fighting.”

“It is what it is, Boss. What’s the order?” asked Gretchen as she hefted her flamer.

“You burn the nest, I’ll come in behind you and drop anybody who responds,” said Samuel as he tapped his com-bead over to the task force channel. “Reapers assaulting gun emplacements from behind the wire, one flamer and one rifle, be advised.”

Samuel received several good copies from platoons that he knew were still down in the cove and nodded to Gretchen. The flamer marine heaved herself up and through the door and Samuel rushed in behind her.

Gretchen pounded across the deck toward the active gun emplacement, which was firing on the marines below and creating such a cacophony in the confined space that there wasn't a chance that anyone in the box had heard her approach.

The flamer marine cut loose with her weapon without even looking to see who or what crewed the nest and a blast of sticky flame filled the space. Gretchen released the trigger of the flamer and leapt to the side just as a burning armored merc came running out of the nest before smacking into the opposite wall and sinking to the ground. More screams came from the nest, though were quickly silenced when the ammunition belts of the gun they'd been shooting touched off and riddled their burning bodies with small caliber rounds.

Samuel and Gretchen advanced once the bulk of the rounds had fired off. The squad leader put two shots in the chest of a workman who attempted to raise his rifle. Samuel felt sorry for the men and women who had been forced into this conflict, but if it came down to them shooting him or him shooting them, the choice was simple. A second workman fell to Samuel's marksmanship and Gretchen fired on another nest just as whoever was inside got the weapon going again.

An armored merc fired on the marines from the far end of the balcony, and his shots hitting Gretchen in the chest and head. As the flamer marine was pushed to the ground by the impact of the shots Samuel returned fire. The marine's precise burst knocked the merc off his feet and the hostile scrambled back into cover around the corridor. Samuel wasn't prepared to look at Gretchen's corpse just yet, no so soon after Marcus, and so he sprinted forward to pursue the merc.

Samuel leapt across the opening of the corridor as he sprayed a magazine's worth of ammunition on full-auto, hoping he could catch the merc unawares without getting hit himself. As it was, the merc had attempted to flee further into the corridor and Samuel could see the limping man disappear behind a door. When the marine reached it he saw that the merc had shot the lock out. Shouting and shooting started inside the room and Samuel kicked open the door and went in with his rifle at the ready.

Four workmen stood over the body of the merc, each of them carrying various hand tools and one cradling a bloody fire axe in his hand. On the ground alongside the merc were the bodies of two more workmen. At the sight of the marine all of the workmen dropped their weapons and held their hands high.

"*We surrender! Grotto right? They forced us to fight! The demons will be back! We've got to get out of here!*" The workmen pleaded desperately with Samuel in rapid fire chatter. It would have continued that way had the marine not raised his hand and shouted.

"*Stand down! Backs to the wall! Now!*" The marine quickly zip tied

the hands of each workman behind his back and then used his belt cable and clip to thread all of them together.

"Boss, you'd better get out here," Gretchen's unexpected voice on the com-bead, gave Samuel a surge of adrenaline shock as he heard the voice of a dead woman.

"*Voss?*" gasped Samuel at the sound of her voice, "I thought you were…"

"Well, the day's not over yet," Gretchen's replied grimly, "We've got trouble coming."

Samuel returned to the balcony with the four workmen at gunpoint and was greeted to the sight of a helmetless Gretchen working the action of one of the low tech machine guns. The workmen looked out and down at the cove and all of them sucked in their breath with visible fear. Samuel turned to see Gretchen peering down the sights of the gun and finally he followed her gaze to the cove below.

Another aquatic swarm was massing at the mouth of the cove and thrashing toward the beach. The rest of the marines had made their landing and were taking up hasty fighting positions. Some of the marines were already shooting at the creatures.

"Sir, we can fight," said one of the workmen, "I can feed her the belts for the gun."

"I'd rather live in a Grotto work camp than get digested by one of those things," said another, "We're pretty sure that they eat you alive when they can."

"Not that they're picky," said another.

"They're worse once they reach land, we think they just use the water to travel through," said the one who had spoken first. "Pretty sure they live on one of the rock islands out in the swamp. Really, we shouldn't let them get to the beach."

Gretchen began firing the machine gun, and Samuel took a deep breath as he used his boarding knife to cut the bonds off the workmen.

For nearly thirty minutes the creatures hurled themselves at the beachhead, only to be repelled each time by the marines. With their boats and flak boards in place the Reapers were able to push back against wave after wave of the creatures, though by the time the frenzy of the enemy was spent, most of the marines had been reduced to using their sidearms. Samuel had exhausted his rifle ammo and switched to one of the assault rifles from a dead merc. The workmen had fed Gretchen's gun every last round they had.

After the engagement Boss Marsters had sent for the second wave of marines, along with much needed ammunition and a tech crew to assess the viability of the plant. By the time the third wave of frenzied creatures arrived, some twelve hours later, the Reapers had dug in

deep and prepared to repel the assault.

Samuel was on the planet surface for several more days as more crew and equipment were brought to bear on the plant, even as more sophisticated defenses were created to stave off the routine assaults by the creatures. Samuel was told by the workmen that they had shipped out as a free-wrench operation, licensed by Wageri Corporation, which revealed to Samuel that indeed it wasn't just Helion and Grotto looking to claim their piece of necrospace. The free-wrenchers needed a security force, but couldn't afford the astronomical rates demanded by Merchants Militant contractors, so they hired an unaffiliated mercenary force.

Once the complex had made landfall and gotten production up and going the creatures had begun their regular assaults. Soon, defending their lives and their claim against the monsters was all the people of the complex could do and the plant fell into disrepair. The mercenaries revealed themselves to be little more than pirates, and had been in the process of scrapping the complex so that they could flee with at least some measure of profit. All in all, it had been the sort of deadly expedition that made for the tall tales of loss and woe in the depths of necrospace.

During the debriefing Samuel was informed that after interrogating the surviving plant staff it was determined by Reaper Command that the complex had the potential to be a profit center and a resource for the overall war. The cost of transporting food all the way across the Ellisian Line and to the front had become an expensive endeavor, requiring more and more ships and fuel, not to mention the occasional conflict with pirates or Helion forces during those supply runs. With the plant back online and well defended, Grotto would be able to supplement, and perhaps replace, the food supplies required to keep the war machine running. The cost of staff, security forces, and ammunition paled in comparison to the savings of having a frontline asset that produced food for the fleets.

What had initially been seen as a salvage of opportunity revealed itself to be one of the most profitable claims of the trade war. At the cost of only half a score of Reapers, it was the sort of claim that made careers amongst those in Command.

5. ON THE FRONTIER

When Grotto Corporation declared official trade war against Helion, the entire population was incorporated into the war effort. Some felt it more acutely than others, though all shared in the burden and what a burden it was, for when Samuel received his expatriation rejection and duty station orders the family had been devastated. They were so close to escaping, on the very precipice of the new life that they had fought so hard and so long to have. With their savings, in addition to all of the refunded expatriation fees, there was plenty to keep Sura and Orion living comfortably on Pier 16 for many years, though neither Sura nor Samuel wished that kind of life for their son.

Though the boy was only five, he had reached an age where he understood much of the strife his parents endured, and he struggled with life aboard Pier 16. It was indeed no place for a child, as it was little more than a space station packed with the winding corridors of temporary hab blocks, shipping yards, and several entertainment and retail decks.

Being on the edge of Grotto space meant that Pier 16 was frequented by a colorful array of space travelers, most all of whom had business dealings with Grotto in one form or another.

The intergalactic corporate system was built upon the foundation of a universal currency, and though each corporate civilization had its own unique brand of society, the existence of a universal currency ensured that the system could function.

Many centuries ago the corporate masters gathered and pooled all of their various forms of currency to establish a standard universal currency. This new currency was based on nothing more than an agreed upon value of their pooled former currencies prior to their destruction and devaluation.

A central financial institution was created, the Currency Control Complex, to exist and operate as an independent entity. The staff and Executive Board of the CCC were formed from within the ranks, in equal measure, of each corporation in the universe. These individuals then renounced their former societies and pledged their lives to the CCC. For centuries the bloodlines of these original members had managed the ebb and flow of the universal currency. The CCC decided how much money existed, what the value of each increment is, and by doing so managed the rates of inflation and deflation. They were protected by an on-going contract with the Merchants Militant, the only other truly independent universe-wide organization in corporate space.

This independence from the corporate system while still being a

critical functionary of the system prevented, in theory, the kind of corruption and scheming that ultimately degrades the effectiveness of backed or fiat currencies.

In many ways, or so it was taught to Sura during her compulsory Grotto education, the CCC functioned much like the religious organizations of the ancient world. The hereditary members of the Complex approach their duties with the upmost reverence. Sura was positive though, that there was some truth in the rumors about the vast estates, private starships, and other trappings of wealth that often accompanied any conversation about the CCC bloodlines.

Thanks to this universe-wide system, trade was possible by anyone with anyone, and though tax and tariff varied from corporation to corporation, as did holding accounts and banking schemes, money was money no matter where one happened to be in corporate space.

Pier 16 was often filled with traders and merchants of one stripe or another seeking to move goods and services in and out of Grotto. While there was a criminal element in Pier 16, comprised of various smuggler cartels and the occasional pirate vessel looking to offload black market cargo, the space station was generally considered a Grotto marketplace. Pier 16 existed just on the other side of marked Grotto space, and was an independent station, though it enjoyed enough proximity to Grotto space that security pickets kept predators away from the station.

Six months after the war with Helion was officially declared, Sura and the rest of the population of Pier 16 paid the price for that close relationship with Grotto Corporation. On that horrible day, Helion revealed the lengths to which they were prepared to go in order to force Grotto to abandon its expansion across the Ellisian Line.

She had been on the market deck, threading her way through the labyrinth of stalls that comprised the massive converted hangar bay.

Unlike the grocery stores of Baen 6 the marketplace of Pier 16 offered quite an array of foodstuffs, much more than she or Samuel had ever experienced. They had assumed that the station would offer similar bland fare to what they'd grown up with. They had discovered that with all of the space traffic, a booming food industry had risen. Vessel crews would disembark with bellies hungry for something more flavorful than ship's rations, and the vendors of Pier 16 had long since adapted to this need for engaging cuisine.

Despite the fact that there were no schools to speak of and very few other children aboard the station, Sura did take some modest comfort knowing that Orion's palate at least would not go undeveloped and since they could not yet leave with Samuel to start their homestead Sura certainly could afford it.

She had been picking through a stack of roasted vegetables when she had reached for a bright red one just as a stranger did the same. When their hands collided he politely apologized and for a moment he and Sura held each other's gaze.

He was a tall individual, dressed in the rugged outfits that Sura had learned were the mark of professional prospectors. Sura recalled that he had made small talk about the red ones being overly spicy, and suggested that unless she knew just how to peel the skins she was better off with the milder yellow ones.

Sura couldn't remember exactly where the conversation had gone, as it was little more than small talk, though it had felt good, and that feeling is what she held in her mind. While the handful of locals Sura had befriended knew her as a Reaper spouse, despite the paper divorce, there were always spacefarers of one kind or another who approached her in the market. Truth be told Sura didn't mind the attention, even if she never returned it, though in that moment with the man she would come to know as Dar she found herself laughing and flirting back in spite of herself. Pier 16 was a lonely place, despite the crowds.

Sura eventually left the market, having coyly refused the man's bold, yet polite advances. With Samuel six months deep in a war that seemed like it might grow larger before it ended, Sura had felt a familiar twinge of guilt. Both she and Samuel had admitted to their past infidelities, though had shared little detail beyond the acknowledgement that they had both wronged one another. Neither she nor Samuel had a desire to know names, places, or details, and both were thankful for the ignorance.

Sura considered it likely that one or more of the women Samuel had been with, alive or dead, were members of Tango Platoon. While part of her was stung by the reality of sending her man back to war alongside former lovers, another part of her was happy that at least he would be surrounded by people who, in their own way, cared about him. Samuel, while on the front lines of a vast war, was among comrades and trusted allies. Sura and Orion only had each other, at least until Rig Halo and its captain.

She had been awoken in the dead of night cycle by the shuddering of the small apartment she shared with Orion. Sura rushed to Orion's side and found him awake and crying, just before a second shudder caused the shelving units in the apartment to fall. Sura had never been in a battle, but most Grotto citizens had worked in several industrial plants, and accidents did happen. When the third shudder shook their apartment Sura was convinced that they were either under attack or some kind of catastrophic failure had occurred on the propulsion deck. She had witnessed a mechanical failure that resulted

in secondary explosions just before leaving her first job, long before meeting Samuel that day in the city.

Whatever the reason, Sura knew the station was in jeopardy and that suspicion was confirmed when the atmosphere warning sirens began wailing. Sura swiftly gathered Orion into her arms and fled the apartment, taking no time to snatch additional clothes or keepsakes. Nothing else mattered to her in that moment but her son.

The corridors were packed with people and the strobing yellow lights that were part of the station's emergency evacuation system. When the yellow strobes were lit it was the safety protocol of the station to load all life rafts and eject them into space. Anyone who was current on their payments for housing on the station was guaranteed a spot on a raft, and those visitors to the station were expected to board their own ships and make good on their own escape.

The station was part of a larger hub of space trade and travel, so it would only be a matter of days or even hours before everyone was picked up. At least, that was the theory, as the station, according to the locals, had never had to actually go through the protocol of launching the rafts.

Sura had held Orion close to her breast and reluctantly joined the pushing and shoving crowd that moved chaotically through the corridors and spilled out into the central station decks. Once she was able to see the central station Sura saw to her absolute horror that Pier 16 was under attack.

Through the plexi-glass shield that served as a barrier between the causeway and the market deck Sura could see what she assumed were assault ships that had smashed their way through the hull of the station. As she watched, frozen in place by her first experience of war, a five man squad of soldiers in the gold and green hued armor of Helion Corporation engaged just over half a dozen Pier 16 security staff in a firefight.

In just a few seconds it was over, leaving all of the security staff dead and only one Helion trooper dead or unconscious on the deck floor. Sura could see that more soldiers were arriving and soon the whole deck was swarming with enemy soldiers.

Finally, Sura was able to snap out of her fugue and started running for the life rafts that she hoped hadn't launched yet from the observation deck above.

The usually well-ordered station had become a riot of activity, as security staff fought a losing battle against more and more Helion troops. Sura barely stayed one step ahead of the advance as she made attempt after attempt to board life rafts only to find that they'd either launched or been captured, as entire launch bays were already held by

the enemy.

At some point either the security staff or, most likely, the invaders, deployed acrid smoke projectiles that created a thick fog that burned the eyes and seared the lungs. She had run blindly then, her only though to keep Orion out of the smoke and away from the enemy soldiers who seemed to have started shooting civilians.

Dar had found her mid-ship, as he and two of his crew, Braden and Yanna, fled Helion troopers who had driven assault craft into the lower mechanic decks. The prospectors had been negotiating a sale of unrefined ink-rock when an assault craft had smashed into the deck. The vacuum seals of the station compensated for the intrusion, though the shooting started just as everyone had re-gained their footing.

Sura had come to find out later that the buyer had gotten greedy, and when given the chance, attempted to keep the money and the ink-rock. Sadly, Dar's sharpshooter had died in the resulting gunfight and the captain and his two surviving crew were forced to flee before collecting the money or recovering the ink-rock as troopers flooded the deck.

Sura had barely been conscious when the prospectors found her, having breathed in so much of the smoke and, though she wasn't fully aware of it at the time, she'd been shot in the back. The round was too small caliber to have been from Helion, and in the chaos there were people shooting troopers and each other.

Orion was conscious, and Dar recognized the boy and his beautiful mother. Though Braden had complained, the captain had been determined to bring Sura and Orion aboard their ship. Sura remembered little of the actual escape aboard Dar's ship, only that she and several other refugees were taken aboard before the ship's crew cut the moorings and ignited a full burn right out of the launch bay. The hard launch might have cooked the bay and ruined much of the equipment that kept it functioning, though it was of little concern to the fleeing prospectors.

Word had finally reached Samuel a few months later, as communication signals were dreadfully scrambled across the Ellisian Line, and Sura had to talk the marine out of deserting his post right then and there. She could hear the weariness in his voice, see the looming emptiness in his eyes, and had done her best to assure him that she and Orion were safe.

With the trade war constantly escalating in scope, the possibility of the expatriation ban being lifted was nil, and victory over Helion seemed unlikely any time soon, there was just so much land to fight over on the other side of the Line. That was when Samuel had admitted that a unionist movement had taken root within the ranks of the Reapers, and though he could say no more on the unencrypted

line, Sura could tell that he was strongly considering joining their ranks. Perhaps a union could use its collective bargaining power to demand the lifting of the expatriation ban even if that meant that the war effort might suffer. Sura had thought it seemed an impossible task.

Samuel was trapped in a war on the other side of the universe and Sura was drifting through the frontier. Never had their fortunes been so far flung from each other, and yet, here they were, still fighting to reach one another. She had insisted that she was safer aboard the Rig Halo than she had been on Pier 16, and certainly more so than her husband on the front line of a war zone, and that seemed to mollify her man somewhat.

The concept of safe had taken on a vastly different meaning once she had reached the frontier, and it took a great deal of spin doctoring for her to present an account of life aboard the ship and on the frontier to Samuel.

She knew what it felt like to be in constant fear that the next communication would be news of his death, and even worse the long stretches of unknown silence, and she wanted to spare Samuel that feeling. Sura decided that Samuel did not need to know just how lawless and violent the frontier was, despite its primal beauty and limitless opportunity.

A person could truly find freedom and realize radical growth potential, but it was often a literal fight get that freedom and keep it.

With no corporate society to govern the fringes of space, everyone out here made it up as they went along, and more often than not the rule was ‘might makes right’. A person could be and do whatever they wanted on the frontier, with more freedom and advantage than they’d ever have in corporate civilization.

The trade off, as Sura continually learned, was the loss of security and infrastructure. While there was no elite class or dramatic wealth inequality, there was also no structured healthcare, or enforcer corps to punish wrong doers or adjudicate disputes, or even high rating tech professionals to keep everything in good repair. Something as simple as replacing an air filtration cogitator for the Rig Halo life support system required a journey back into corporate space or at least to one of the trading outposts on the fringe of mapped space.

Life was so vastly different than the storybook existence that Sura and Samuel had once imagined and since he was entrenched in the most brutal trade war in a hundred years, Sura had worked to spare Samuel the burden of the truth. The story she told was one of adventure and vast unclaimed planets, which was true in the most basic way, though she regularly left out the often violent competition over those unclaimed places.

As the months had dragged on and their communication continued, Samuel endured the grinding and bloody monotony of war while Sura had found herself and her son caught in a whirlwind of deep space adventure. It was unlike anything she'd ever dreamed of, even if often difficult and dangerous. She updated him as best she could, when and where communication signals were solid enough to get messages or videos through.

Sura took the truth of her experiences and accomplishments on the frontier and spun them into fictions that would bolster Samuel. She stripped away the violence and lawlessness she had witnessed, and passed along the details and stories that she thought would give her man the strength to soldier on.

If he survived the trade war, Sura had already found the world upon which they would make their home, and once he saw its primal beauty, he would forgive her those fictions, of that she was certain. They had their land now, even if neither of them could be there presently to enjoy it, but it was there. The claim had been laid, and now more than ever Samuel and Sura both had a clear and tangible idea of the life they were fighting to build for their family.

Sura sighted down the barrel of her gun and managed to blow out the knee of a shooter who was attempting to rush Dar while the captain was reloading his assault rifle. She sucked in her breath and silently screamed at herself to get up and get moving.

Gunfire crackled across the canyon and Sura could hear Dar shouting into his com-bead and cursing in frustration. The signal was spotty planetwide, as they had learned upon their arrival some six weeks prior, though it seemed especially so in the canyon.

Sura checked the action of her rifle for the sixth time and knew that she was just stalling. If she didn't move the claim jumpers would eventually manage to get someone across the low river and flank her. The embattled woman closed her eyes and started counting down from five as she took one intent breath in and out, just the way Dar had shown her. By the time Sura reached five her heart rate had lowered and she felt much steadier. She loosened her grip on the rifle and launched herself from behind the bullet-chipped boulder.

Sura sprinted away from Dar, widening the gulf between her and the spirited captain. The move was unexpected, and by the time the enemy had re-trained their weapons on her, Sura had sprinted within a few yards of the tree line. Perhaps had she been a more classically trained and seasoned veteran it would have been second nature for her to maintain squad cohesion and seek to close the gap between herself and her battle buddy. As it was Sura acted on pure instinct, and sought refuge and camouflage in the dense foliage just above the

canyon floor.

Dust plumes sprang up around her as the hostile shooters worked quickly to tighten their aim. Sura's duster flapped in the air as the young woman's powerful legs pumped with speed and her booted feet plowed through the underbrush. Splinters and leaves swirled around her as more and more rounds chased her progress, but she managed to avoid them by cutting right and then left to confuse their aim.

Sura kept running through the forest that overlooked the canyon and started making a wide arc to work her way back around to where she was certain Dar still held his own against the bushwhackers.

As she ran, Sura found herself rather thankful that physical fitness was a priority among the crew of Rig Halo. Sura had always kept herself healthy, though six months ago she would be slowing down by now with quivering muscles and gasping painfully for breath. The young woman slowed her pace so that she could move through the underbrush with a degree of stealth, though she dared not slow too much, else Dar end up flanked or overwhelmed.

She could have fled the fight entirely, as it was only a five or six mile hike back to the Halo drilling complex, but despite her wish to do exactly that, Sura could not flee. The man had risked his life for her and her son, and there was no way in the entire universe that Sura was going to leave him to die. There was a debt to be paid, and her Grotto sensibilities were deeply ingrained.

Sura was nearing the treeline and could hear the now familiar bark of Dar's chopped down assault rifle, and her heart began pounding in her chest as she readied herself to fight back. Her time as part of the Rig Halo crew had been challenging, though she'd not yet had to face the prospect of actually killing another human being.

She had worked hard to become proficient with her bolt-action rifle, though only against range markers and target drones. The crack of small arms fire in the canyon below took her thoughts back to Pier 16 even as she reached the edge of the treeline and took a knee to survey the area below.

Sura reached the treeline and took a knee so that she could raise the bolt-action rifle to her shoulder and peer through the scope. A quick survey of the canyon revealed the sight of Dar crouching behind the incapacitated ATV. The prospector was burning through his ammunition at a swift pace, and it was only his suppressing fire that was keeping him alive.

Sura could see at least four shooters on his position. Once the prospector ran out of ammunition he wouldn't be able to keep them at bay and he would either be rushed or flanked, both scenarios ending with him dead on the ground and his ride and gear forfeit. That's what life was like out here on the frontier, Sura could hear Dar saying in

her imagination, you only keep what you can hold.

Sura drew a bead on one of the shooters, a man carrying an assault rifle who seemed to have forgotten that there might be other enemies in the area as he had stepped out from behind cover to continue attacking Dar. The young woman did as she was trained, and let her breath out in a slow and controlled exhale as she squeezed the trigger of the rifle.

The large bore weapon lacked the flair of the pistols, shotguns, and automatic rifles that most of the Rig Halo crew preferred to carry, however, in that moment, Sura considered her choice well suited to use in such large outdoor areas. The round sped across the canyon and thudded into the man's chest, picking him up off of his feet and hurling him backwards into the underbrush. Sura could still see a fine red mist hanging in the air for a fraction of a second after the man disappeared, and she knew there was no way he could have survived. As she had been trained, the young woman, now a freshly minted killer, worked the bolt action and ejected the spent shell just before slotting another. Dar had lost his sharpshooter during the Helion attack on Pier 16, and Sura, wanting to be more to the crew than just another refugee, asked for the job.

Sura trained her aim on another shooter, who hadn't noticed yet that he and his comrades were under attack.

With one kill under her belt and the prospect of another in front of her she still couldn't stop her mind from going back to the night on Pier 16 that had catapulted her into this new life she could never have imagined.

Sura's eyes misted over with tears and she missed her shot at the second claim jumper. The round went wide and bored into a tree near the shooter, who then turned his rifle in her general direction. The claim jumper didn't seem to notice her exact position, though he had an idea of where she might be. The man appeared to activate a com-bead and speak into it before he raised his rifle and fired indiscriminately in her direction. Sura had the feeling that he was attempting to flush her out, and that one or more of the shooters she could see, or even one she couldn't, would be ready to gun her down the second she broke from cover.

Several bullets impacted near her, and yet Sura held her ground, taking long, deep breaths to keep herself calm. It had been a long time since the nightmare of Pier 16 and she was no longer that frightened woman, so she held her ground, slowly ejecting the spent shell and chambering another. In a few seconds they would either hit her with a lucky round or pause to re-load, and then she would take another shot, and this time she wouldn't miss.

Sura exhaled and this time her shot punched a hole through the

man's chest and sent his body tumbling down the canyon wall. The prospector crew needed to hold this claim, as it had been several months since they had found a good mining play and everyone's bank account was getting thin. They had to win this fight and keep drilling, or soon Rig Halo would be on the drift.

If only her soldier, Samuel, could see her now, thought Sura as she sprinted from her firing position towards another clump of underbrush in an attempt to gain a better angle of fire, he would most certainly be rushing to her side one step ahead of the bond agents.

Several rounds struck the tree near Sura's head and she threw herself to the ground.

Sura watched as Dar gunned down the last of the shooters, getting to her feet as he casually slit the throat of the one she had wounded. Shouldering her gun, she went to join her comrades. They had won this battle, but she knew there would be others.

Like her husband had done for so many years for her sake, she had to survive her own journey for his.

6. TASK FORCE VANGAURD

The shift manager looked haggard, and Samuel thought it was likely she felt even more so. It wasn't just the marines who had been living on a relentlessly aggressive war footing for over a year. The physical and psychological toll was beginning to show everywhere in the fleet. From the techs who maintained the equipment, the support crews that staffed the ships, to the bureaucrats and accountants who stood watch over the Bottom Line, everyone was becoming frayed at the edges, and fatigue was beginning to set in.

Neither Helion nor Grotto seemed able to establish enough regional supremacy to turn the tide of the conflict, and the talk of the tug was that both corporations were raking in so much profit that neither would be willing to back down anytime soon.

What had begun as a competitive and violent land grab between the two giant companies had slowly evolved into a protracted and grinding affair as both sides worked to exploit what ground they held even as they sought to undermine the efforts of their opponent.

Much like corporate expansion into the primordial frontier on the edge of known space, the companies had slowed their growth and exploration in order to more fully exploit what they now possessed. As these skirmish lines hardened into corporate-held territories the role of the military had begun to transform into a posture of border security and asymmetrical warfare. As the weeks continued to pass into months, entire quadrants of Ellisian space became provincial territories of either Helion or Grotto. In those quadrants and upon those borders the endless cold war of corporate relations replaced the furious trade war that still raged on the edges of necrospace. For those bureaucrats, dignitaries, and elites of Helion and Grotto who had not yet achieved enough profitable stake, the violent exploration of Ellisian space was far from finished.

Reaper Command had broken several tugs away from the main battle fleet and had them set anchor in the shadow of a swirling gas giant that moved in a wide and lazy orbit around one of the all-too-common dying stars that dotted the voidscape of Ellisian space. While the battle fleet deployed work crews to construct an orbital station, Reaper Command pushed the small salvage fleet deep into Ellisian space, well beyond the haphazard skirmish lines of the Helion/Grotto conflict.

Samuel sat uncomfortably in his seat, his mind occupied with dark thoughts of his wife out there on the frontier. He felt more trapped in the clutches of Grotto than ever, and his comrades had begun to notice. After the events at Swamp Base the Reapers had

returned to the tug and continued following on the heels of the battle fleets.

Over and over the scrap wagon swarms made their plunder and fought off other scavengers as Grotto forces pushed and expanded against the resistance of the machine race and the might of Helion.

The unionist movement was gaining momentum throughout the ranks as Virginia Tillman recruited more and more marines. She made no special speeches or grand gestures, just the grind of one on one communication, and those changed marines then carried the message to others.

Samuel still refused to wear the camera rig, more so now that Reaper Command had begun to crack down on protocol breaches and intelligence information security, but the formerly recalcitrant marine was now an official member of the unofficial military unionist movement.

To Samuel's surprise most of the rest of Tango Platoon were either part of Tillman's union or sympathetic to it, and the talk of the tug was that even Boss Lucinda Ulanti was aware of the movement and intentionally allowing it to flourish aboard the tug despite the standing order forbidding such organization and the ever watchful eye of Boss Wynn Marsters.

Samuel and Ben turned their heads, along with most of the rest of the marines in the room, as several members of the upper echelon of Reaper Command entered the room. They were dressed in crisp suits of black and grey, though each of them carried a sidearm and ornamental boarding knife. In all of his years as a Reaper Samuel had never actually seen one of the commanders in the flesh.

The command deck was sandwiched between the bridge and pilot decks, heavily armored and continuously guarded, not that any marine had occasion to be near any of those decks. Samuel was used to receiving his orders from the shift manager and no others, as she was the liaison between the elites and the common soldiers.

When he saw Boss Aiken among the group of four commanders Samuel's mouth fell open as he watched them take a seat just to the side of the shift manager's lectern.

"Boss Aiken? Am I hallucinating here?" whispered Jada as she leaned near Samuel's ear from the chair behind him, "I knew he got promoted, but Command? They won't even push Wynn up to shift manager."

"Part of me wishes they would, I've been listening to that crone for over six years and I still can't get used to that permanent frown," chuckled Ben in his digitized voice while he keyed the volume low, "Or maybe it's that she never has good news. Maybe we should kiss, that could help."

“I’m serious Ben, this is weird,” snapped Jada, though she shoved Ben’s shoulder playfully, “You don’t get to be command unless you’re already somebody, or know the right people. Grunts, even as decorated and badass as Boss Marsters, don’t get to be command.”

“You pretty much have to be born into it or be plucked out of your place in life and given a new one,” muttered Virginia from between Jada and Harold, though she kept her voice even-toned, careful not to let her, at times, ugly temper to send her into one of the rants she’d become somewhat known for in the barracks.

Tillman was skirting the edges of legality with her union speeches. Ever since the marines had been overtly re-tasked as frontline soldiers she had become something of a surly individual when her blood was up.

“As you may have surmised, the talk of the tug, as it were, is true in most respects,” said the shift manager as she tapped her lectern with her metal pen to return everyone’s attention to her, “The primary Grotto battle fleet has halted its advance into Ellisian space and is focusing its efforts upon the construction of a combat outpost.

This orbital battle-station will be staffed by cor-sec elements and contractors from the Merchants Militant, and serve as the border checkpoint of Grotto space in this sector. In other words, the full-scale militarized expansion of Grotto territory has come to an end, for the time being. For the specifics of our mission here, allow me to introduce Commander Soren III, of House Indron.”

The marines looked on in stunned silence as the man they knew as Boss Soren Aiken stood and took his place at the lectern.

“There has been much speculation as to the nature of the machine race we have been fighting when not engaging Helion forces. Most of what we now know about the machines is classified, naturally, though our current mission requires that some pertinent details be shared with you. Many of the marines in this room were present during the initial encounter with the machines.

Some of you have been involved in subsequent engagements prior to the tomb-world cordon protocol being enacted. It is assumed by Command that much in the way of rumors, tall tales, and incorrect information has spread throughout not only this vessel, but the battle fleet as a whole.

What I am about to tell you is indeed classified and has only been re-categorized for your use on this mission, and afterwards will be redacted, as will the temporary security clearances you have been issued.”

Lord Indron paused to make sure everyone’s attention was now fixed firmly on him.

“The creation of reliable star charts on this side of the Ellisian

Line has proven difficult. As many of you have guessed, the more active humanity has been in this region of space the more, for lack of a better term, 'settled' the star systems have become. We have yet to determine the cause of this phenomenon, though Grotto has a prevailing theory about the Line, and that is part of why we are here today," said the man that Samuel now knew as Lord Soren of House Indron.

"Research indicates that somewhere between fifteen to twenty thousand years ago," Lord Indron continued, "There was an 'Event', best described in layman's terms as the detonation of an energy weapon which had apocalyptic results. The very quantum fabric of this entire sector, what we know as Ellisian space, became unstable. Over time that stability has returned incrementally as the quantum mechanics that govern this sector correct themselves. The more matter and energy we bring across the Line, the more momentum we have allowed that quantum correction to gain. Logic follows that eventually this entire sector will return to normal as the physics of Ellisian space and what we typically refer to as mapped space, achieve equilibrium." Lord Indron then keyed an image of a gun spider in action, firing its built-in weapons off screen.

Samuel shuddered involuntarily even though it had been a long time since he'd seen one of the creatures. The image was likely one captured by the body cameras of one of the penal legionnaires during the initial conflict. Samuel had been focused on fighting other humans since the outset of the war. None of the marines in the Baen Reaper cadre had fought against the enigmatic machine race since the initial encounter on UK1326."

"Most of you use the slang term 'gun spider' to describe these hostiles and that is certainly an apt description. Mossimo Gedra, the High Cognate in Service to the Board, has spent the better part of this war delving into the tomb-worlds and investigating their denizens. In his honor, the machine race is referred to as the Gedra, when depicted in any official capacity.

While Grotto has yet to fully realize the functional use of the Gedra's weapons, cybernetics, or building materials, the Board is positive that this will only be a matter of time." Lord Indron displayed another image, this one a close up of one of the alpha cyborgs with the cable-like hair, then he posted a second photo of another cyborg, and then a third of yet another. "Each of these creatures has similar devices that appear to be embedded in their chests. The High Cognate believes that they are, after a fashion, master control modules. His theory is that these alpha cyborgs have central command and control of the entire tomb-world functionality, including the gun spiders and the energy-reactive buildings.

This control also, in theory, extends to the resurrected human beings that have been encountered by certain marine elements. I believe you lot have taken to calling them 'Hollows'. Dissection of the resurrected has shown that several machines were implanted, rather crudely, into the nerve centers of the corpses. Logic would hold that this was how the alpha units were able to control those reanimated individuals. To date, we have not been able to capture an intact alpha cyborg, and have therefore made no progress in resurrecting or controlling any of the re-animates or gun spiders, much less activate the building materials of the cities themselves. However, we are certain that it can be done, and it is paramount that we prevent Helion from making further progress."

Lord Indron faced the room and curled his hands over the front of the lectern. "Helion forces have clustered around this system in significant strength. While Grotto is engaged in a hardening protocol throughout Ellisian space to further secure our existing holdings, Helion is making a bid for the system you see displayed." As Lord Indron spoke he brought up several star charts on the main briefing screen to reveal a sector of space filled with battle fleet icons.

"Our recon elements have reported Helion's discovery of a massive tomb-world, far beyond the scale of what we have encountered so far. Based on our findings from other tomb-worlds, we believe that Helion has set anchor above the planet prime of the machine race. We are part of the task force dispatched to claim that planet."

His announcement was met with stunned silence as the realization of what was being discussed dawned on the assembled marines. The briefing room was a massive auditorium, and as was the custom, every marine on the tug was in attendance. Lord Indron looked out over the sea of faces and nodded grimly before pointing upwards at the screen.

"Rest assured that you will not be alone in this endeavor, as this same briefing is being given to the Kratos and Lovat Reaper Corps, and their tugs will be joining us in the offensive. All three tugs, and their full complement of marines, have been seconded to House Indron. You will be considered support units for a joint vanguard. Elites from the Merchants Militant will also be present in the field. Make no mistake ladies and gentlemen; this will be a massive undertaking."

Samuel sat through the rest of the briefing in a shaken silence, his mind filled with a tempest of thoughts. This was just the sort of abusive treatment from Command that the unionists were trying to prevent. If Grotto would not let him expatriate, and then hurled him into the kind of warfare for which he was not trained or equipped,

then how was that anything but oppression? And what fresh hell did this covert elite, Boss Aiken, or this Lord Indron III of House Indron, have in store for them on Gedra Prime?

7. GEDRA PRIME

The assault ship finally touched down and in seconds disgorged its cargo of Reapers before its thrusters flared and the battle-weary ship returned to the FOB.

Samuel knew that while Tango Platoon might be the first salvage element deployed into the engagement, the assault ship would likely be making at least a dozen more trips before the full company of Reapers was in the field. Ahead of him Samuel could see the skyline of the dead city and despite being wreathed in the smoky haze of warfare, the buildings literally crackled with visible energy discharges as the Gedra executed their security protocols.

As usual, the orbital photos did the necropolis no justice, and now that he was in the shadow of its great walls he understood what made this one so special. It was easily four times the size of the buildings on the other tomb-worlds, and certainly seemed as if it could stand as the center of the machine race civilization, or at least the civilization of whomever had created them.

The Helion battle group was trapped between the emerging horde of gun spiders and the relentless attack of the Grotto force.

As Samuel pumped his legs to keep pace with the rest of the marines he surveyed the scene, his veteran's eyes picking up enough details on the ground to supplement the swift brief they had been given before being herded into the assault craft.

A sizeable occupational force of Helion troopers had dug in just outside the walls of the dead city. Helion techs were presumed to have established the closest distance that invaders could approach the city without activating the defense protocols that would awaken the gun spiders and the Alpha cyborg. At that position the Helion engineer corps had rapidly dug a network of trenches and hardened them with gun emplacements in addition to using fencing and metal barriers to create artificial kill zones above the trenches. In this new Dark Age the corporate armies fought more like the militaries of ancient history and that had always struck Samuel as the real indicator of just how cheap life was thought to be, by both Helion and Grotto.

There was sufficient technology for wars to be fought with robots and long-range weapons, considering that humans possessed advanced space travel and could build things like battle mechs and grav tanks. Such a conflict, however, would be radically expensive, and so was anathema to the politics of profit. To maintain the universal Bottom Line, wars were fought with modest military tech, wielded by soldiers in the field, and much of the more sophisticated warfare technology

had either been shelved, redacted, or intentionally forgotten.

In high orbit a cataclysmic void battle was taking place as the Grotto and Helion battle fleets fought to control access to the planet's surface.

Helion had created a thin picket line of ships intended to filter out any would be scavengers, but had been somewhat unprepared for the sudden wedge of Grotto attackers. Even as the sky above was afire with burning debris from the void battle making planetfall, both sides were intent upon pressing a ground campaign despite not having established air supremacy.

The Lovat Reaper cadre had been preparing themselves to salvage the aftermath of the void battle, which had turned sharply in Grotto's favor, when a second Helion fleet emerged from deep space and launched their counter-attack.

The Kratos and Baen Reaper cadres had been sent planetside after the House Indron battle cruisers had punched their way through the Helion picket. It was a bold stratagem to engage in a ground war when the void battle was yet to be completed, though Command had found it necessary given the anti-ship artillery batteries placed within the Helion fortifications just outside the city. While the planetside artillery did little more than harass the invading fleet, now that Grotto was up against a Helion counter-attack the harassment had begun to show its cumulative effect.

There was haphazardness to the whole affair that struck Samuel as indicative of what the trade war had done to transform the already dystopian corporations of the universe. Just as with the command structure of the Grotto military, the Reaper elements and the stormtroopers were getting caught up in the hasty grab for power and glory. So too, it seemed were certain elements of Helion.

Greed was beginning to overwhelm the traditionally reserved Grotto military bureaucracy, and now it seemed to be having its own effect on their arch-enemy.

More and more of this war, thought Samuel as he narrowly avoided tripping over the broken body of a penal legionnaire, was becoming an incoherent mess of personal agendas and private armies. What had begun a year ago as the largest single battle fleet ever assembled in Grotto Corporation's history was now a fractured force consisting of sub-fleets whose commanders sought only to further their own gain.

Tillman theorized that it was only a matter of time before the Board of Executives would take notice of the chaos and send an elite punitive force to restore order to the Ellisian war effort. She had hoped to have her unionist movement at its peak of power before then, but with such a grand offensive in progress, that seemed to have

little chance of becoming reality.

Tango Platoon sprinted across what remained of no man's land, littered with the bodies of hundreds of penal legionnaires, and reached a natural trench that had been worn into the grey rocky ground by some ancient stream. They began to see the first real evidence of the conflict that had been raging planetside prior to Kratos and Baen marines being re-tasked from their usual scrap wagon duties.

Many dozens more legionnaires were scattered throughout the trench, with the occasional Helion trooper among the dead. There were broken gun emplacements and even the smoldering remains of two battle mechs amid the carnage. On the other side of the trench were more Helion corpses and beyond that, the hasty fighting positions of the Grotto stormtroopers overlooking another trench network.

"Looks like Helion put up one hell of a fight before they gave up the ground," observed Hondo as he knelt down next to a dead trooper and began stripping the body of its rifle and one spare magazine. When he noticed Samuel and Ben looking at him inquisitively he slung his own rifle and brandished the Helion weapon.

"These fire the same type of bullet as our combat rifles, but there's an internal charger that gives the projectile a super heated boost. Helion slang calls it a hot round."

"They'll punch right through our armor," grumbled Jada as she joined Hondo in looting a body for its weapon and ammunition. "I wish the Grotto techs could figure out how to keep the chargers running, these things are only good for a magazine or two and then they run cold. Or at least that's the talk of the tug."

"Patented security measure," stated Boss Ulanti flatly as she walked past the group of soldiers, making her way towards the current Grotto frontline. "Keeps their tech from being useful to scavengers in the long-term."

"Cut the chatter, people," said Boss Marsters over the com-bead, having never slowed his brisk pace. "Loot if you're going to loot and get moving. We're here to provide rifle support to the stormtroopers while they keep the enemy hemmed in."

"They're going to let the Gedra chew on 'em for awhile before making a play," said Ben as he and Samuel kept pace with each other while Hondo and Kade sprinted to catch up. "I saw one of the Dire Sword drop ships make a pass over the city's skyline just as we landed. The gun spiders should be nice and angry by now."

"No wonder you ate dirt like a rookie," laughed Harold, keeping pace with the rest of the marines despite his heavy gun and several drums of ammunition. "Too busy taking in this luxurious view of

paradise."

The marines pounded across the former no man's land, stepping over the bodies of more enemy troopers and moving around several burning vehicles that had been destroyed in the fighting.

The sound of the conflict was deafening as the Gedra gun spiders began to swarm out of the city to attack the Helion defenders from behind, even as the Grotto forces pressed them at the front.

Samuel quickly found himself feeling as if he were back on Tetra Prime. This was the first time that the Reapers of the Baen fleet had been deployed against Helion troopers in a ground campaign since that ill-fated mission that had claimed the lives of Boss Taggart and so many other marines.

There had been Helion troopers still defending some of the void salvage in this first year of the Ellisian trade war, though combat in the cold silence of space was its own theatre. Being on the ground, covered in dust and feeling gunfire thrumming in one's chest even as the reports boomed in the air was the stuff of memory.

Samuel found himself emitting a low growl as he picked up the pace; one he noticed was matched by the rest of the marines. The reapers remembered Tetra Prime, and though they had won the day on that distant field, it was clear that the veterans of Tango Platoon weren't done getting their payback.

The hereditary stormtroopers of House Indron looked, to Samuel's eyes at least, like giant black beetles that happened to be wearing bright red capes. They were tall men and women, made more so by the bulky segmented combat armor in which they were encased. Each of them had a visored helmet that went a long way towards giving them that menacing insect look, so much so that Samuel assumed that was part of their purpose. Most of the stormtroopers carried auto-guns, which were big bore automatic assault rifles that fired high impact rounds designed to crack and shatter armor more than they were to penetrate.

As the Reapers reached the front they saw that the stormtroopers had taken the trench and the gun emplacements and were busy firing into no man's land as a wave of Helion troopers, supported by several mechs and a few tanks, were advancing.

Samuel felt bile rise in the back of his throat as he realized that the enemy was advancing across ground that was littered with the broken bodies of penal legionnaires.

Clearly, the penal legion had fought their way across no man's land, taken the first parallel of trenches, then been forced across a second stretch of no man's land to seize this parallel. Once they had done so, the stormtroopers had swooped in behind them, occupied the forward positions and forced the surviving legionnaires to make a

suicidal rush against the final and most stoutly defended Helion position.

Nearly five thousand souls, without body armor, had been ejected from massive transport vehicles, handed rifles with one or two spare magazines and were then hurled into the thick of combat without much regard for their survival. So long as they achieved sixty to seventy percent of their objective the penal legion would have represented significant savings, as it was much cheaper to throw five thousands convicts into the meat grinder than to expend the several score stormtroopers it would have taken to accomplish the same task.

Before Samuel had a chance to determine if he thought that was murder or just a dirty reality of war, the voice of a stormtrooper officer filled his comm-bead.

“Sons of Indron! The enemy is upon us once again!” boomed the voice, and to his right Samuel saw a stormtrooper with gold epaulets striding through the trench, attended by two other stormtroopers that Samuel assumed were his honor guard, “If our Lord Indron insists that we fight alongside penal scum and salvage marines, then let’s show them all how we rise above!”

“Indron! Indron! Hooah!” came the throaty howl of an entire company of stormtroopers as they opened fire on the striding battle mechs that had reached range. The Helion forces likewise found their own range and engaged as well.

As ordered, the Reapers fell in behind the stormtrooper positions as the Indron warriors unleashed a mighty salvo of fire at the encroaching Helion advance. The enemy troopers were advancing under the guard of a multitude of armored transports and mobile barricades, their battle mechs rushing ahead of them.

The heavy weapons of the stormtroopers were stout machine guns mounted on anti-grav platforms with thick recoil dampeners so that they could fire and move as needed. These and shoulder mounted rockets were exchanged with the auto-cannons and missile-pods of the battle mechs, all with devastating effect.

Samuel threw himself to the ground and was thankful that the Reapers were here in support. All of the fanciful thoughts of revenge against Helion troopers for Tetra Prime were pounded out of his head by the steady crump of explosive impacts and the screams of dying warriors. Samuel picked himself up and belly crawled over to a low barricade, then took a kneeling position next to Holland and raised his rifle to his shoulder.

The marine looked down his sights and did his best to ignore the heavy weapons duel going on around him, since his combat rifle could do little to effect the outcome of a fight involving mechs and armored gun emplacements.

In the context of this battle the Reapers were little more than light infantry, only a step above the penal legion, but as dozens and then scores of marines took up firing positions their contribution began to make itself known.

Samuel sighted in on a Helion trooper and took a deep breath before selecting a three round burst on his rifle and squeezing the trigger. At that range his rounds were not able to penetrate the trooper's armor, but the impact knocked the man to the ground, which Samuel figured was better than nothing. By the time he'd found his next target the enemy troopers had found their range and opened up. The hot rounds from their rifles punched through the carapace armor of a stormtrooper who was standing on a firestep in the trench below Samuel's position.

The marine watched as the armored corpse fell backwards into the floor of the trench. Samuel returned fire. Now that the range was beginning to close, his rounds found purchase and the marine was able to bring down a trooper with sustained fire.

Jada was using her scavenged Helion rifle with great effect, and each time she squeezed the trigger another trooper collapsed in a heap. Samuel was proud of the other marine, as she'd only improved after her ordeal on Vorhold. It was as if Jada had emerged from deepspire with a determination to become the best fighter she could be, which was saying something considering her decorated veteran status so far. Samuel could see that for the most part it was just the Reapers and the heavy weapons that were holding the line, as most of the stormtroopers were standing still and simply watching the advance.

"What the hell are they doing?" snapped Samuel as he and Holland worked together to shoot down another trooper and drive several more around to the other side of their armored transport, directly into the cone of fire for Ben's heavy machine gun.

"Waiting for the enemy to draw near enough that when we attack they will be unable to flee without remaining in range," said the voice of a stormtrooper who stood behind one of the barricades nearby. "We prefer combat to be an up close and personal affair."

In response to the stormtrooper's boast the com-channel suddenly erupted with firing orders from officers up and down the line of the trench and the entire company of auto-gun toting stormtroopers acted in unison.

The Helion troopers had closed distance with the trench and only sustained minor casualties from the harassment of the Reapers, though several of their armored vehicles and both of their battle mechs had been destroyed in the exchange with the gun emplacements, which themselves had been reduced by half.

When the order went out the stormtroopers raised their auto-guns and fired, sending a mind-numbingly vast wall of hard rounds at the Helion force. In the first barrage troopers were flung far and wide as round after round slammed into their armor, the rounds that did not penetrate still causing enough concussive damage to pulp the soldiers inside their suits.

"*Grotto advance! Take the third parallel*!" bellowed the stormtrooper officer, and as one the stormtroopers rose from their fighting positions and surged forward.

Samuel drilled another trooper with six rounds from his rifle before it clicked dry. As he reloaded he watched the company of stormtroopers rush out of the trench and into the teeth of the Helion advance.

It was insane, and yet, as Samuel watched, he realized that the stormtroopers were specifically equipped for this kind of action. The heavy carapace armor protected them acceptably well from the hot rounds so long as the stormtroopers were in motion, as only direct hits seemed to bring them down. The stormtroopers fired as they ran, having little need for re-loading thanks to the massive drum clips that fed their weapons round after round. Soon what had been a clear division between the Helion line and Grotto was a bloody and chaotic jumble of smoke, explosions, and clusters of soldiers fighting each other among the burning wrecks of the Helion vehicles.

"Reapers, advance to support!" crackled the voice of Boss Marsters, giving the order that Samuel feared would come.

Samuel nodded to his squad and they emerged from behind the barricades, rushing across the thin planks that had been set in place above the trench once the stormtroopers had seized it. The planks let them cross over the trench and rush straight into the firefight.

Samuel fired as he moved, taking his time to confirm a target before squeezing the trigger, ending the life of a Helion trooper who had just managed to bring down a stormtrooper.

One of the Helion armored transports suddenly hit the gas and barreled forward; abandoning the platoon of troopers it had been protecting and assaulting the trench itself.

Samuel couldn't tell what the pilot of the vehicle must have been thinking, and perhaps it was simply panic, but as the vehicle reached the trench he saw their plan but was helpless to do anything to stop it.

The armored transport snapped the plank it drove over and the nose of the vehicle drove down into the dirt at the bottom of the trench while the vehicle up ended itself. Once stationary the hatch blew and full platoon of troopers began disembarking.

"*They're trying to flank us!"* shouted Samuel as he saw several more transports make the same maneuver, "*Squad Hyst on me!"*

Samuel sprinted back to the edge of the trench, switching his rifle to full-auto as he ran. The marine leaned over the edge, took quick aim at the troopers below and began firing. The troopers had been so intent on shooting the backs of several Reapers who were still working their way across the planks that they didn't see Samuel until it was too late. Two troopers fell to the ground riddled with holes as Samuel sprayed them with his rifle. Then Bianca, Holland, and a new marine named, he thought, Naobi, added their fire to his. The troopers were caught by surprise, so confident had they been in their stratagem. In seconds seven of them were on the ground dead or dying.

The remaining troopers were thrown into confusion as some of them pressed forward and continued to fire on the Reapers further down the trench while others counter-attacked Squad Hyst. The marines fell back as a flurry of hot rounds peppered their position, leaving Holland with a smoking hole in his leg. Naobi took two rounds in the thigh, which caused her to lose her footing and stumbled sideways into the trench. Samuel didn't see her die, but it ceased to be relevant when Gretchen stepped up and filled the trench with flames from her weapon, wiping out the rest of the troopers in a sticky inferno.

Ben had been holding their other flank with his heavy machine gun, exchanging fire with troopers who kept trying to slip past the stormtrooper counterattack and into the trench.

"Prybar, they're on the left and coming in fast!" shouted Ben as he drew the marine's attention to a cluster of gun spiders that had appeared on the other side of the Helion forces that he'd been fending off. As the marines watched the gun spiders engaged the troopers and while the Helion soldiers fought hard, it was clear that in a few moments the Gedra would advance on the Reapers in the trench.

"Boss, this ain't a proper battle, just a big bloody brawl!" growled Harold as Squad Marsters retreated from the ongoing fight between the stormtrooper company and the remnants of the Helion advance.

"Command has dropped all of us in a meat grinder and they don't even have a plan!" shouted Virginia, as she and Jada snapped off several rounds indiscriminately at the Gedra and Helion conflict.

"*Armor on the right! Sector 2! Sector 2!"* screeched the voice of a stormtrooper through the com-bead just before a nearby gun emplacement started firing at a battle tank in the distance.

"Boss, we're glorified scrappers," snarled Boss Ulanti as she and her squad re-joined the platoon and took up securing their position from the right. "We aren't ready for this kind of warfare, regardless of how bad Command wishes it was true."

"Fall back and hold the trench marines," said Boss Marsters flatly after a stern look from Boss Ulanti in a rare display of defiance. "If the

stormtroopers don't take the third parallel they'll be driven back here."

Tango platoon rushed back to the trench line, now much worse for wear after the Helion assault. Roughly half of the marines in the field had pressed forward to support the stormtrooper advance, while the rest had been caught up in defending the trench against the sudden Helion transport gambit.

Samuel risked pausing while on the plank, looking up and down the trench to see that while the marines had stopped the troopers from taking the trench, the cost had been dear. By the time Samuel and his squad had taken up position in a blasted gun emplacement and mounted Ben's heavy machine gun in the best place they could, the fate of the stormtrooper's advance revealed itself.

They were in full retreat, with the Helion forces nipping at their heels. As the stormtroopers reached the trench and began hurling themselves into cover, the Reapers laid down suppressing fire from their overwatch positions. Ben fired rounds from his heavy machine gun with deadly precision, opting to annihilate individual targets while his counterpart, Harold, sprayed his weapon back and forth like a hose. The combination of the heavy guns with the marksmanship of the marine riflemen halted the Helion pursuit.

Samuel looked up from his rifle after shooting a Helion trooper, watching as the stormtroopers began to turn around and fight back. In seconds the auto-guns of the stormtroopers joined with the combat rifles of the marines and the Helion forces started falling back.

Everyone had sustained heavy casualties. The Helion forces were surrounded by the Grotto line and at their backs were the Gedra. So far the gun spiders, at least those that could be seen from Samuel's position, were focusing on the Helion forces outside the trench, and had either not noticed the Grotto forces or were focusing on the easy pickings first.

The whir of turbine engines could be heard over the battlefield and Samuel turned to see that there were several dozen Dire Sword dropships enroute to the frontline.

"*Finally!* They're going to get the elite contractors in here to tip the scales," observed Holland as he followed Samuel's gaze.

"*Marines, eyes up!"* barked Boss Marsters. The marines of Tango Platoon did as instructed, some of them taking in for the first time the awe and dread inspiring sight of the void battle in the sky above.

Flaming debris streaked through the sky as several dark shapes loomed in their sight, and only in those last seconds did Samuel realize what he was looking at. The drop pods slammed into the ground all around the battlefield, most of them landing either in or around the contested trench network.

The pods were as large as a passenger vehicle. As soon as their metal landing gears were set, small caliber machine guns extended from the nose cones of the pods and sprayed fire in a three hundred and sixty degree arc around the pod.

Abasi Hondo took a round in the shoulder and possibly one in the stomach as Samuel watched, before he fell from his firing step into the trench below, and then the hatches of the pods blew.

From the pods leapt massive armored warriors, three to a pod, all of whom bore snarling metal beast masks upon their helmets. They began to unleash murderous fire from their railguns, slicing through the bodies of stormtrooper and marine alike.

"*The Folken*," breathed Samuel, horrified, sudden terror loosening the grip on his rifle.

The Folken were loyal to whoever held their contract and apparently, today, that wasn't Grotto.

Samuel tried to kick his shocked mind into gear and raise his rifle to defend himself. Bianca screamed at Samuel's side and her voice brought him back even as the sound of her combat rifle thundered in his ears.

The Helion troopers had rallied and were fighting their way through the gun spiders with the help of the Folken elites who had landed near those particular enemies.

Samuel took aim at a Folken elite who wore a hideous looking spider mask and started pelting the warrior with burst fire. The marine's rounds didn't manage to punch through the warrior's thick armor, though they did knock him off balance enough so that sustained fire from Ben could tear into the warrior's left side.

The spider-faced warrior fell to the ground and rolled, pointing their railgun at Squad Hyst and firing. Ben spun backwards as a projectile caught him in the chest and sent him tumbling down behind the barricade of the gun emplacement. Holland dove for cover despite taking a hit to his calf and belly crawled toward Ben's position. Samuel lost sight of both of them in the confusion.

A gun spider scuttled over the top of the trench, firing on any human target it could find, making no distinction between corporate affiliations. After it had taken out a Helion trooper and a marine it caught the spider-faced Folken's attention. The warrior blew the gun spider to pieces and then heaved themself to a standing position.

The elite seemed to have mercifully forgotten about Samuel and Bianca, who crouched behind the twisted metal of the gun emplacement, focusing its fire on a group of stormtroopers who were attempting to re-arm a mounted heavy weapon. The black carapace armor of the stormtroopers shattered under the withering fire of the rail gun.

Taking advantage of the elite warrior's momentary distraction, both Samuel and Bianca emerged from cover and rushed the elite while firing their rifles on full-auto. The spider-face mask was pitted with hard rounds as the warrior spun, too late, to meet the attackers. Finally, the combined fire of the two combat rifles emptying sixty odd rounds into it at close range brought down the Folken warrior.

The com-bead was filled with so much chatter and conflicting intel that Samuel and Bianca both switched their beads off. There was simply too much chaos on the battlefield to manage. Samuel decided that he and Bianca had to just hold their ground.

"We stay here and we survive," said Samuel as he scavenged two auto-guns with full drum clips from the dead stormtroopers. "This war is beyond our power to affect."

Bianca nodded and took one of the auto-guns after slinging her combat rifle. They were each down to their last rifle mag. They knew the auto-guns were going to kick hard, but it beat fighting with sidearms and boarding knives. Samuel looked back to see that the Dire Sword drop ships had been diverted far south of the front line, so there would be no help from them.

That was when he noticed that the static electricity in the area seemed to be increasing. He was shocked by nearly everything he touched despite the insulated combat armor.

"That battery taste on the back of my tongue," said Bianca in a low shaky voice, "It's familiar."

"The Alpha cyborg," groaned Samuel as he knelt behind a barricade. "It must be in the field out there raising the Hollows."

"I see them," said Bianca as she pointed to no man's land on the other side of the trench.

Out of the chaos of the three-way firefight came the shambling reanimated corpses of human beings, mostly penal legionnaires and Helion troopers. It was clear that the Helion third parallel had been completely over run.

Bianca cut loose as the first wave of Hollows reached the opposite edge of the trench, pulping several of the hostiles with high impact rounds from the auto-gun. Samuel trained his own weapon on a Helion trooper who attempted to rush their barricade, apparently unaware of their presence until it was too late.

More Helion troopers moved through the trench, still locked in combat with the stormtroopers. As more and more Hollows and the occasional gun spider found their way into the trench, the stormtroopers fell back into the distance. Soon, the only friendly Samuel could see was the woman fighting next to him.

For a startled second Samuel thought he recognized the bestial mask of Imago, the Folken he'd met many years ago on Tetra Prime.

Samuel watched as the warrior cut his way through several Hollows to reach and kill a stormtrooper officer who had managed to barricade himself inside a wrecked Helion armored transport. By the time Samuel finished blasting a gun spider that had emerged from the trench the Folken warrior was gone.

Gun spiders. Folken. Helion troopers. Hollows.

It was all entirely too much, thought Samuel as he cradled the auto-gun in his arms and prepared himself to fire on anything hostile that dared approach their position.

No paycheck was worth this kind of bloody madness.

8. HARD STRIKE

Bianca squeezed Samuel's hand as the two of them perched on the edge of the squad leader's bunk. There was always going to be an emotional distance between them after their last parting, they both knew that, yet here they were again.

War, it seemed, had a strange and incalculable effect on the human heart, and though much of the bond between them had been severed both by intention and circumstance, not everything was gone. There was a kind of heat between them, a comforting warmth that seemed to push back against all of the dirt, blood, and noise.

Neither of them had spoken when the assault craft had arrived with medics and tech support. The two marines had simply continued to lean against one another, back to back, one supporting the other as they kept watch on either end of the corpse filled trench.

Eventually, the medics performing battlefield triage tapped them for transport back to the FOB, and they went in silence. They had been deposited at their camp, both of them none the worse for wear in a physical sense. They had helped one another with the post-combat protocols, going through the motions like the veterans they were as armor and weapons were stripped, cleaned, and re-assembled.

The platoon shower rack was empty, and at first they had begun washing in their own stalls, though by the time the water ran cold they were in the same stall, neither clearly recalling who went to who. Now, they held Samuel's datapad and watched the brutal footage that had been uploaded to the task force channel, a clear breach of protocol that had them glued to the screen.

Neither of them could tear their eyes away from the images on the screen and they were not alone. Across the makeshift tent city marines crowded around datapads, personal monitors, and feed players watching the same piece of footage. For months now the discontent among the Reaper Corps had been growing, as had membership in the underground unionist movement within the collective Grotto fleets.

The talk of the tug was about the House Indron's forced march conquest of Gedra Prime, which had hinged upon hurling Reaper elements into the frontline meat grinder against superior Helion forces. When word had reached other marine fleets, it wasn't just the individual marines who were angry about the shift in their job description and the increased risk without compensation, but also portions of Reaper Command.

"I never imagined what it might look like to an outside observer," whispered Bianca as she drew herself tighter against Samuel's body.

“It’s a miracle any of us have survived this long.”

“This could change everything, Bianca.” Samuel’s voice was husky with grief, but resonating with grim determination. “If enough people see it. I haven’t heard from Sura in months, communication is so tricky to maintain on this side of the Line, there’s no guarantee that the signal is strong enough to reach outside the camp. This is coming from a personal uplink, a marine or a tech somewhere; it would take Reaper Command boosting the signal to push it out.”

The marines watched as POV footage from Harold Marr came on. He may very well have been the person to wear the camera that Samuel had earlier refused. As Samuel watched he began to grow sickened with himself at having refused Virginia, knowing in his gut that it was capturing footage like this, or the death of Spencer that was going to make the change that got the Reapers off the front line.

On the screen were Marr and Tillman, standing alongside several other marines and stormtroopers exchanging fire with Helion troopers and Gedra gun spiders. Because of the camera angle it was very difficult to tell exactly what was happening, though it was sufficient to remind Samuel of just how heavy the fighting had been in the last moments before the Folken arrived.

Marr was blasting troopers and gun spiders alike, displaying the kind of skill with the heavy machine gun that a marine only possessed after years of experience.

Simply seeing the chaotic and blood grandeur of a three way fire fight from a perspective other than his own was shocking to Samuel, and from her reaction, it was the same for Bianca. For an instant Marr’s peripheral vision swept across Squad Hyst and Samuel saw himself taking command of the gun emplacement before the marine’s head swiveled back downrange. The furious engagement continued for what seemed like an eternity. Samuel watched stonily as several marines and stormtroopers were cut down despite pulverizing the Helion forces.

Samuel gripped Bianca’s hand because he knew what came right after the Helion retreat began. Even though he knew it was coming and it was just images on the screen of his datapad, the marine flinched when the first of the drop pods slammed into the ground and began spraying indiscriminate small arms fire towards the Grotto line.

Samuel watched as three Folken warriors emerged from the pods and immediately began hurling clouds of high velocity projectiles from their rail guns.

The elite mercenaries were just as terrifying on screen as they were in real life. From Marr’s point of view Samuel watched as the elites rushed the Grotto line spitting death before them. There were only three of them, but that was more than enough to scythe their

way through the stormtroopers and marines who were not able to find adequate cover fast enough.

Marr was a stalwart fighter, and did not attempt to find cover, but stood his ground and concentrated his fire on a Folken warrior with a hideous bird mask design on their helmet. Several of the stormtroopers followed his example and they managed to bring down the warrior. That was when Marr got hit, and the big man's perspective went wild as the marine dropped his weapon and fell into the trench below. He landed on his back and Samuel could see the terrifying shape of a Folken warrior leap across the length of the trench even as it mowed down the group of stormtroopers who had assisted the marine.

Samuel knew from his own experience that in the next few seconds Squad Hyst would be engaging the spider-faced warrior before the apocalyptic Gedra counter-attack turned the entire battle into a free-for-all.

Marr was gurgling on what Samuel assumed was the man's own blood, and soon the dirt and blood smeared fact of Virginia Tillman filled Marr's vision.

The young woman hauled the huge marine up against the wall of the trench, which was no small feat. The trench was already littered with the bodies of penal legionnaires, Helion troopers, House Indron stormtroopers, several gun spiders, and even a few Reapers.

Virginia put Harold's sidearm in his right hand and two extra magazines in his left before she took up a firing position against the wall opposite him, giving the camera a clear view of the marine. The sound had partially gone out when Marr fell into the trench, but you could still make out the fading words as Tillman imploring Marr to remember his two sons, to stay alive for them. She insisted, with a gallows smile, that his death benefit would only cover the trade school education of one son, and he had to live if he wanted a better life for both of them.

The two marines onscreen suddenly reacted to a sound that, though barely audible, both Samuel and Bianca remembered well.

The keening wail that signaled the beginning of the Gedra counter-attack.

In a few moments several gun spiders and Helion troopers leapt into the trench and the two marines began defending their position as best they could.

In the haze of combat, Samuel could see through Marr's eyes that the Hollow were beginning to fill the trench. As expected, the Hollow ignored the gun spiders and focused on battling the marines and the handful of Helion troopers who had sought refuge there.

For several hellish minutes Tillman, Marr, and three Helion

troopers held the trench as a horde of hostiles descended upon them. The fact that Grotto and Helion were lifelong corporate enemies vanished as they were suddenly united comrades-in-arms battling against a common foe.

Two of the Helion troopers went down relatively soon as there was little cover in the trench. Most of the Hollow were either slain by Helion troopers or Grotto penal legionnaires. The last trooper fled once all the Hollow on the right side had been killed. Seeing that, Samuel couldn't help but wonder if that was the man that he'd shot who had come careening around the blind corner of the trench wall.

Virginia had expended all of her ammunition for her rifle and gunned down the last of two Hollows with her sidearm before taking a round to the throat. The Hollow that shot her had been a Helion trooper in life, and the hot round burned a hole right through the young woman's armor and the meat of her esophagus.

She managed to switch to full-auto on her pistol and bring down the Hollow, then, through Marr's eyes, Samuel and Bianca watched as Virginia asphyxiated.

Marr was out of ammunition. He lay there, unable to do anything as an electrified cable suddenly slithered over the edge of the trench and buried itself in the back of Virginia Tillman's neck.

Samuel felt sick as he, Marr, Bianca and all the marines with datapads watched Reaper Virginia Tillman transform into a Hollow. The Hollow that had been their comrade, stood shakily and looked toward Marr, lurching forward to attack him when it was torn to pieces by small arms fire.

Two Dire Swords leapt into the trench and began firing on the handful of other Hollow that had risen. Samuel recognized this as the action that had already been dubbed, "The Dire Sword's Revenge", when the merc battalion rallied.

They had pushed back the Folken and wiped out the Hollow, in addition to destroying the Alpha cyborg. Even though Samuel had seen the detonation of the ancient being, he'd had his own pressing troubles to deal with.

The footage stopped seconds later when, presumably, it was temporarily shorted out by the electrical discharge of the dying Alpha cyborg.

The two marines sat in silence when the footage ended, each lost in their own thoughts, until the sound of boots stomping up to the tent awoke them from their fugue.

"Prybar, Kade, on your feet!" barked Boss Ulanti as she threw back the flap of the tent, allowing the ambient and sickly yellow light of the planet's surface to illuminate the interior. "Boss wants Tango Platoon mustered with full kit immediately; link up at quartermaster

station twelve."

"Roger Boss, what's the op?" responded Bianca as she stood up from Samuel's bunk and began fastening her armor onto the body glove that covered her from neck to toes, only to be met with a cunning smirk from Ulanti.

"The truth is out there and it's piping hot," laughed Boss Ulanti in the reckless and high pitched tone which often reminded those who had known her before Vorhold that she had been deeply changed by whatever horrible things had happened to her in deepspire. "Time to do the job."

"Hold up, you're telling me Wynn Marsters is calling for a Reaper strike?" Samuel said incredulously despite the fact that he was swiftly buckling his own kit to his body and preparing for muster. "He's the definition of a company man, how does that make any kind of sense?"

"Ask him yourself," ordered Boss Ulanti as she turned to go, "Strap on and move out marines!"

Samuel and Bianca finished preparing themselves and left the tent to make the quick march to quartermaster station twelve. They were joined by the rest of the surviving members of Tango Platoon as well as the new members.

As was the practice, the marines who belonged to platoons that had suffered catastrophic losses were re-assigned to other units that had open positions. After the passing of Virginia Tillman, Marcus Baen, and two other marines who had not been part of Tango long enough for Samuel to commit their names to memory, there were four spots open.

To Samuel, even with the new additions, Tango Platoon seemed stretched pretty thin with Harold Marr, Abasi Hondo and Ben Tekada all recovering from their wounds in the medbay.

Along the way, Tango's march through the camp was noticed by many, and within minutes of the platoon reaching the quartermaster station there were several dozen onlookers, most of them marines.

Boss Marsters was standing with his back to the quartermaster station, facing the fourteen marines as they lined up by squad, every marine armed and armored for war.

"Tango Platoon locked and loaded sir!" shouted Boss Ulanti as the last of the marines stepped into place.

Samuel noticed that Boss Ulanti had activated her broadcaster, so when she barked into the com-bead her voice was carried out across much of the camp. She and Boss Marsters each wore one of Tillman's vid recorders.

As he watched, Boss Ulanti keyed her bead to the Task Force Channel which had remained active in the anticipation of a long and difficult occupation of the planet surface. Anything they said would be

broadcast into the com-beads of every marine on the task force, including Reaper Command and any of the stormtrooper officers who happened to be on active duty at that time.

"Recorders are uplinked to a live feed and simulcasting with the command channel," Boss Ulanti stated, squaring her shoulders and planting her feet firmly at attention. "Good to go, Boss."

"Grotto Corporation has existed for over a century without any labor unions," stated Boss Marsters as he addressed both Tango platoon and the growing crowd of off duty marines. "Hundreds of years prior to that, the few unions that did exist were either weak or puppet organizations for the establishment, and our society is the poorer for it. Many of you have heard about the underground unionist movements that have been active and growing all across Grotto space, especially in the Baen system and those movements have found their way into the Reaper Corps."

Already there was radio chatter coming in on the com-beads and Samuel knew that not everyone listening would be sympathetic to what they were hearing. For Boss Marsters to even speak about the existence of unions, much less with a positive spin, was outside of usual protocol. It was one of the unspoken rules in Grotto society that unionizing and collective bargaining were simply not discussed, much less considered, by any good and loyal corporate citizen. To have a high profile marine such as Boss Wynn Marsters giving a pro-union speech, especially in the wake of the Tillman footage, was certain to garner extreme and negative attention from Command, House Indron, and Grotto itself.

"Virginia Tillman died yesterday in a heroic effort that saved the life of fellow marine, Harold Marr, who even now is recovering in med bay. She was a decorated veteran and a valued member of Tango Platoon.

Tillman died in combat against a superior Helion battle force so that Grotto Corporation, through the auspices of House Indron, could lay claim to this world.

She died in service to the Bottom Line, as have so many marines since the founding of the Reaper Corps on Grotto Prime years before any of us were born." As he spoke, Boss Marsters unslung his rifle and checked the slide to make sure a fresh round was chambered.

"Reapers from generation to generation have been fighting and dying for the enrichment of the Grotto Bottom Line.

As Reapers, we see little of our own enrichment once we cover our life bonds and medical expenses. There is no percentage for us, only a modest pay rate and an eventual death benefit.

We don't get the lavish palace barracks, the gilded armor, or the health and pension plans of the hereditary stormtroopers. We don't

command the wages and the autonomy of the Merchants Militant."

As Boss Marsters continued speaking, more and more marines, most of them off duty and dressed down, joined the crowd.

"Our place is in the salvage yard, not on the front lines," Marsters continued. "We don't have the training or the equipment to go up against the enemies that we are made to confront. Yet, when ordered into the fight, we fight, and some of us die, but we are not compensated beyond our scrap wages for going above and beyond what we were trained and expected to do. Are our lives truly worth so little to Grotto Corporation?"

The steady stomp of marching boots could be heard, signaling that at least one company of stormtroopers was moving through the camp toward the crowd. The assembled group began exchanging nervous looks, except for Tango Platoon, who stood grim and silent as their leader went on.

"The common workers have seen the Tillman footage that you have seen, and much more, as many members of Tango Platoon have been recording their actions.

The common workers would rise and strike if the strong are willing to lead them, if the Reapers are willing to stand up," Marsters cast his gaze over the assembled crowd, "And stand down."

A low murmur began to emanate from the group at these words.

"Many of you are already secretly avowed unionists and many more besides are sympathetic to the cause. We helped take this planet. Grotto Corp needs us to keep it, which is why now is our moment to make our voices heard." As Boss Marsters spoke, Boss Ulanti and Abasi Hondo leapt over the clerk's counter to join the clearly sympathetic quartermaster as they began opening weapons lockers and setting loaded rifles on the counter.

"We can refuse to fight," Marsters said. "Without our help, on this field or in the void, the Grotto war machine will grind to a halt until our demands are met."

"If we aren't going to fight, why are you in full kit and stacking rifles?" called a marine from somewhere in the crowd.

Marsters stared out over the crowd, but before he could reply, Ben Takeda's digital voice came loudly over the shuffling and noise of the crowd.

"The last labor strike on Baen 6 was a hundred years ago, at Assemblage 23." He turned to face them with his grim mask, reminding the other marines of the price he'd already paid for Grotto's Bottom Line. "And instead of getting the negotiations they asked for, the strike ended with the massacre of one hundred and seventy four unarmed workers at the hands of enforcers." He picked up a rifle and held it aloft. "So we have guns."

Boss Marsters' voice rang out again. "The collected Tillman footage has shown the common workers of Grotto that the Reapers are just as exploited as they are, but unlike them," he held up his own rifle, "We have the power to force an honest negotiation."

Columns of stormtroopers, near the back of the crowd, were beginning to muscle their way into the camp.

"*Tango Platoon, defensive pattern, arms at the ready!"* barked Boss Ulanti. At her command Tango Platoon locked step to form a semi-circle around the quartermaster's counter and unslung their weapons.

"We can make this corporation better and gain our rightful share of the Bottom Line that is bought with our blood. If you want to see a change, then grab a rifle and stand with us!" Boss Marsters shouted, handing out rifles to the surge of marines who came forward.

They had handed out several dozen rifles by the time the first column of stormtroopers forced their way through the crowd to the front. The hereditary soldiers did not hesitate to level their autoguns at the assembled marines, but were obviously surprised when the Reapers leveled their own weapons in return.

Emboldened by the impossible sight of Reapers facing off against stormtroopers, more and more marines began coming in behind the quartermaster's depot and joined the growing armed crowd.

The task force channel was awash in panicked chatter from Reaper Command as they and House Indron officers argued back and forth about who was responsible, casting blame and thinly veiled threats at each other as everyone listened.

It was clear that at least some of the individuals in Reaper Command were sympathetic to the strike, as the channel remained open despite the ugly bickering and lack of decorum being displayed by Reaper Command and the vitriolic House Indron officers.

"This signal is being bounced and broadcast throughout the Grotto fleets and in the systems at home. The Line does strange things to communications, but sooner or later people will know this is happening," Bianca said, stasnding firm next to Samuel. "You can hear the stops and starts in the feed as new comms ping on the signal."

"If this turns into a gun fight the whole war effort will fall apart" Samuel observed. "Not every marine is willing to strike, but enough are that Helion could possibly capitalize on the chaos and push Grotto back across the Line."

He carefully looked through his sights at the face of the stormtrooper he'd picked as his target. Both he and the stormtrooper looked into each other's eyes, recognizing that if the shooting started they were both likely dead men.

"Hey, Boss?" Gretchen asked Marsters as she looked out at the stormtroopers over the pilot light of her flamer, "Do we stand here

until somebody gets bored and starts shooting or is there a plan? No offense, sir."

"We hold our position, fangs out, until I get the right guarantees from the right command rating," responded Boss Marsters, his cold eyes scanning the increasingly hostile no man's land that had formed between the marines and the stormtroopers.

"Keep it steady, marines," growled Samuel on the task force channel, taking a chance that it would galvanize his comrades without sending them into a shooting fit and knowing that he was likely creating a saying that would be on the lips of strikers all across Grotto, "Remember Tillman."

Those words instantly echoed back from untold numbers of marines in the crowd, and were soon repeated again and again on even the task force channel as more and more marines broke protocol and made themselves heard.

9. THE ANOINTED

Fangs were shown on both sides between the striking marines and the stormtroopers and the standoff had gone on for eighteen grueling hours. In that time the ranks of both sides had grown considerably. It might have gone on even longer had it not been for a sudden Helion counter attack.

By then several thousand marines remained in the camp and refused to participate in the fighting, only a few of them breaking away from the strike to defend the camp with anti-air batteries. The stormtroopers facing off with the strikers were unable to break away and join in the defense.

The Dire Swords and remaining stormtrooper units were hard pressed to fend off the Helion attack. Though eventually successful in their efforts, the casualties were significantly higher compared to what they would have been if they had fought alongside the Reapers.

That had been a direct hit to the Bottom Line and finally slammed the point home.

After eighteen hours, fatigue had Samuel struggling to even keep his rifle even pointed in the general direction of the stormtroopers when Boss Marsters had finally given the order to disperse. He had received a confirmation of negotiations and a writ of protection for striking marines from the Anointed, a group of Grotto elites whose word was absolute. Unbelievably, their strike had been felt all the way to the apex of Grotto society.

No Grotto citizen, enforcer, stormtrooper, factory worker or aristocrat would dare defy the word of the Anointed. The Anointed were the highest power in Grotto civilization, a shadowy collective of individuals to whom even the Board of Executives had to abide.

With the strike ended, the marines had mustered out to aide in the defense of the Grotto claim, as a third and even more savage Helion counter attack was launched against them.

It took the better part of two weeks before the Anointed representative arrived, but during that time key negotiations had already been exchanged by the core members of the strike, Samuel among them, and the Anointed.

Samuel could hardly believe that he had been transformed into a unionist. He was a factory boy, then a Reaper, and now a unionist boss. To be seated in a small chamber, across from one of the most powerful individuals in Grotto, was stunning, even if Samuel was one of the three squad leaders in a highly decorated military unit that had apparently just won a major victory against their own corporation.

Samuel struggled to keep his composure in the presence of the Anointed, and listened keenly as Boss Marsters made history.

"You realize, of course, Citizen Marsters, that total forgiveness of the life-bond would have a catastrophic effect upon Grotto Corporation as a whole," stated the Actuary as he squared his shoulders and intertwined his fingers to form a steeple as he set his elbows on the hard surface of the table, "Moreover it would have a cascading negative impact upon the Bottom Line for a multitude of corporations."

"With respect, Anointed One, that impact is of modest immediate concern to us. I have soldiers fighting and dying for Grotto in the pursuit of a better life for themselves and their families. Beyond a few exceptions, most of them will continue that better life as part of Grotto. However, due to institutionalized financial obstacles and the overall adversarial relationship between the actuarial tables and the citizen that has been cultivated within Grotto society, their willingness to fight has come to an end," Marsters responded as he held the gaze of the Actuary with a deep calm Samuel had not seen on display since the face-off with Boss Aiken in the Vorhold downspire.

"The life-bond creates a near insurmountable interest bearing principle that reduces the effectiveness of standard salvage wages in extricating a soldier from those obligations, less so if that same soldier has dependents on the home front.

Hazard deployments do offer a sizeable wage spike, though when balanced against potential medical costs or the actual loss of life, they become only marginally more effective at lifting a soldier or their family out of the toxic debt cycle.

The death benefit is a large sum indeed, though you know much better than I do that the average death benefit does little more than pay off the individual bond and medical debts of the soldier, leaving at most only a modest remainder for any dependents."

"Without the burden of a life-bond the Reapers would be highly motivated, through financial incentive, to be aggressively effective salvage combatants," added Samuel, doing his best to match the tone of Boss Marsters, "Because then we would, according to the hard numbers, be fighting for our families and our futures. Any marine who can perform basic math knows that a high percentage of their daily wage is stripped away by debt."

"May I presume that in addition to the strike broadcasts and footage, you have seen the vid-clip of Reaper Virginia Tillman being KIA?" asked Wynn as he fluidly interrupted Samuel, with only the slightest air of rebuke at the outburst.

"An effective bit of theater preceded by a most tragic loss of life," nodded the Actuary before he glared at Boss Aiken, "And an equally

tragic breach of information control on the part of one or more members of Reaper Command."

"Marines throughout the Reaper Corps, even the small percentage who have not laid down arms, are calling her Saint Tillman," said Wynn. "I am told that back on Baen 6 there is a foundry, where she once worked, that has been tagged with graffiti of her name and urges to unionize and strike."

"Remember Tillman. Yes, the combination of strike broadcasts and the explicit coverage of her death has caused a great deal of defiance and unrest among the bonded class, most of which, however, we have been able to quell effectively and with little conflict," responded the Actuary. "Though no acts of civil disobedience has had quite the immediate impact as your Reaper strike did. Nevertheless, many others in the bonded class have been incited to strikes, gatherings, and demonstrations.

Your timing with the Helion counter attacks against this significant claim, use of arms, and the promise of violence across the trade front is the only reason yours was not silenced immediately."

At that, Boss Ulanti turned toward the Actuary and the Grotto executive's bodyguards tensed, the feral aggression practically oozing out of the marine.

"To be exact in my terms," said the Actuary as he held his palms up to cut the tension. "This is a labor dispute, and history has shown that the labor movements that are not protected by force of arms are the most likely to fail.

Citizen Marsters, you are either a student of history or an astute observer of corporate society at large. Regardless, the death of Reaper Tillman has indeed been an effective PR tool for your cause, upon this we are agreed. That being said, what is your point in bringing attention to the vid-clip, beyond its effectiveness at bringing an Anointed to the negotiation table?"

"The death of one marine should not ignite such passion and defiance in the citizens of Grotto," said Wynn, eliciting a confused look from both Samuel and the Actuary. "A soldier should die and be mourned by family, honored by comrades, and be soon forgotten. It is a testament to Grotto's culture of oppression that the death of a single marine, heroic as it might have been, has brought forth such a response from the population."

"Should I infer from this that you mean to say that in a less oppressive society such a death would go relatively unnoticed by the greater population?" asked the Actuary as he leaned forward, his eyes glinting with interest. Samuel imagined that this is what he looked like during the most heated of financial negotiations.

"Precisely," said Wynn flatly, and Samuel could see in the man's

face, after years of fighting at his side, that it was costing the man dearly to speak so callously of the death of one of his dearest comrades.

"As it stands," he continued, "Reaper Tillman fought and died for a pittance. Despite the death benefit her disabled husband and their daughter will receive, they will still be burdened with the life-bond of the child when she comes of age.

Jared Tillman lost both of his legs when a nefadrite cauldron over-pressurized and exploded. The damage to his spine was severe enough that only an Augur implant could help him. It was far more than their credit rating allowed, so he is now chair-bound.

His employment eligibility upon graduation and life-bonding was categorized as manual industrial. Without education which they cannot afford, he is unable to work. Virginia took up soldiering because it was the only way they could keep their family afloat and avoid debtor's prison.

People know their story now, they've seen the vid-clip, and the general population knows now what heroism and loyalty count for in Grotto. Nothing. So we strike, and maybe they will too, until something changes."

"The life-bond," uttered the Actuary as he leaned back in his chair with a deep exhale. "Now I understand. One might suspect that Virginia Tillman took unnecessary risks in order to encourage a heroic death on screen, knowing what the combination of such a death and the particulars of her family life would do to ignite a fleet-wide Reaper strike."

"Our labor is the only thing of value we can offer Grotto," said Wynn, "Whether we're swinging a hammer, pressing a button, or pulling the trigger. People pride themselves in what they can do, but it's time for Grotto to pay for their loyalty, to *earn* it, not presume it through institutionalized obligation.

If we don't work, if we don't fight, then we may be carted off to prison or die in the streets, but I assure you, Anointed, Grotto will die with us."

"Hyperbolic to say the least, Citizen Marsters, though I gather your meaning, of course. I have reviewed your demands and have created a counter-offer, one that I hope we can settle upon, before more turmoil sullies this great corporation." As the Anointed spoke, he slid a laminated stack of documents across the table into Wynn's hands.

The platoon leader picked them up and began to read through them, taking his time with it, uncaring at the uncomfortable silence that descended upon the room.

Boss Ulanti stared daggers at the bodyguards while Samuel did

his best not to make eye contact with the Actuary. The Anointed must have noticed, as he spoke directly to Samuel.

"Citizen Hyst, your file indicates that you expatriated your wife and son, and then found your own expatriation denied at the outset of the trade war. You have my sympathies; the timing of such events was unfortunate." The Anointed was obviously attempting to display a sincere expression of concern, but his face seeming to be struggling to pull it off. "You will be pleased to know that our counter-offer does allow for expatriation rights to be reinstated for each Reaper force once it completes its current tour of duty and returns to its founding system.

Assuming you survive your remaining duties, I wish you luck on the frontier. Our research indicates that former Grotto citizens tend not to acclimate to life outside Grotto, however, after reviewing your combat records and psych file I theorize that your life after expatriation will make the graph plot much more engaging."

It took Samuel a moment to realize that he'd just been paid a compliment. Before he could respond, Boss Marsters looked up. "This is the fifth counter offer made by your office," he said, "and I consider it fair under the circumstances." He slid the documents back across the table.

"Significant changes must be implemented gradually, else the system as a whole will suffer," the Anointed said, accepting the documents. "There will be tangible immediate gains for the bonded population, and over the next several decades the remainder of our agreement will be progressively applied each fiscal quarter.

Our business here is concluded then.

As you have likely estimated there are dozens more unionist leaders that I must meet with across Grotto space, each with their own series of demands, many of them not nearly as modest or realistic as yours."

The Anointed collected signatures on the documents from Boss Ulanti, Marsters, and Samuel, then, before leaving he turned and said, "Citizen Marsters, your presence on Grotto Prime as the primary representative of the Reaper's Union is non-negotiable and effective within three days. I shall look to see you at the next Board meeting."

The Anointed left and both Boss Ulanti and Samuel looked aghast at Boss Marsters.

"My presence was an unofficial demand, made directly by the Actuary," said Boss Marsters as he stood up, answering their unspoken question. "Tango Platoon is being disbanded, and everyone is being re-assigned."

"We shined bright enough they had to snuff us out, eh?" laughed Boss Ulanti as she held the door open for Samuel and Boss Marsters.

“Retire the celebrity soldiers so they can’t come back around and ask for more.”

“Something like that, yes,” agreed Boss Marsters while the three squad leaders walked out of the room and were met with the sight of Lord Indron waiting for them at the end of the corridor. “It’s just another compromise. We let them retire the platoon, they don’t have to worry about us making new trouble for them and we don’t have to worry about two-faced plants joining our ranks for their own agendas, case in point.”

The marines shared a short chuckle just before they reached Lord Indron.

10. PLANS WITHIN PLANS

Samuel had never even seen an aristocrat's palanquin, much less ridden in one. During his time as a Grotto civilian he had never lived, worked, or commuted in a zone that was frequented by the elites of corporate society.

Boss Ulanti had politely retired back to the barracks, while Samuel and Boss Marsters joined the Lord at his request. Samuel was not surprised to discover that both Virginia and Boss Marsters had been colluding with the Lord of House Indron prior to the ground invasion of Gedra Prime.

It seemed to Samuel, that everyone had an agenda, some personal Bottom Line that they worked tirelessly to achieve. For him, it was a life on the frontier with his growing family. For Virginia it had been a unionist movement that could operate in the open without fear of violent reprisals or institutionalized marginalization. For Wynn Marsters it was about protecting the interests of not just the marines of Tango Platoon, but the entire Reaper Corps.

Lord Indron has his own agenda, one that had begun with a House tradition that demanded he get military experience while incognito amongst the common soldiers. That agenda culminated with seeking fortune and glory on the front lines of the Ellisian Trade War, and his ultimate gambit for Gedra Prime.

"You realize by now, of course, that I am responsible for the signal and footage, of Virginia's death and the entire collection, passing through the command filters and going out on the Reaper Command channel?" asked Lord Indron with a knowing smile.

"Tillman told me that she had secured support for the strike from elements within Reaper Command. Given your time with Tango Platoon I suspected it might have been you. The Reapers and the new Union owe you a great deal, Lord Indron," nodded Boss Marsters as he looked straight into Soren's eyes before giving the man a thin smile and returning to his paperwork, adding, "Of course none of that gratitude could be expressed publically without creating a number of complications for House Indron, a risk I am sure you were prepared to take. My hope is that you will reap some manner of reward for your efforts."

"Grotto Corporation is on its way toward a better future, which is reward enough. Though indeed, I have appropriated the requisite number of signatures from the Anointed Actuaries to empower me to bypass having to get a ruling from the Board of Executives.

The Anointed see the potential gains to be had from unlocking the secrets of the Gedra technology, and unlike the board, they are able to

look past the short term losses that will be incurred from the continued military seizure and occupation of tomb-worlds," said Lord Indron as the palanquin lumbered across the broken ground towards the Lord's camp, "Today's meeting enabled me to get those signatures."

"House Indron footed the bill for the penal legion, since this mission was classified as elective," breathed Samuel as the marine finally came around to understanding just how complex and bold Soren's plan was, "And in exchange House Indron holds exclusive title and deed to the tomb-world."

Indron nodded approvingly, "Naturally, and thanks to the Reaper strike I was able to meet the Anointed under plausible circumstances without attracting a trade infringement demerit from the Board or give any of the other Houses an opportunity to file any anti-trust or traitorous dealings motions against House Indron." Lord Indron smiled as he looked out the window at the necropolis that dominated the skyline, "You have to understand, Prybar, the Board of Executives represents everything that is best and worst in Grotto Corporation.

In this case they are very much against innovation, and prefer to rely nearly exclusively on rudimentary technology and human capitol. They will let the rest of the tomb-worlds we've claimed sit and collect dust, essentially shelving them to keep anyone else from coming up with a way to profit.

I agree with our departed comrade, Tillman, in that the military union's success will have a cascading effect, we've already seen evidence of that. Unionist movements will rise up, and the cost effectiveness of treating the citizenry as human capitol and a primary profit center will gradually become a secondary element of Grotto economics, perhaps even tertiary. Technology is a way to expedite the kind of innovation that this corporation needs if it is going to be the dominating company in the universe. We can only achieve that with collaboration, in this specific case I mean Augur Corporation."

"I suspected some degree of corporate collusion when I saw that your stratagem hinged on Merchant Militant operatives to enter the city at a greater expense to your House than, say, a Reaper detachment," said Wynn flatly and without looking up from his datapad as the former platoon leader poured over the new REAPER rights and protocols paperwork, making minor corrections, additions, and subtractions as he went, all of which would be brought up at his first meeting with the Board. "No citizen of Grotto would spend more for the same result if there is not some additional benefit to be gained from the cost."

"The Dire Swords came gratis with Augur parti-cipation," Lord Indron replied, "And the mercs will be given prototypes and steep

discounts once the Gedra weapons technology has been decrypted.

Mercs are easy to negotiate with when you acknowledge that all they really want are bigger guns and better pay. Augur and House Indron, and by extension, Grotto Corporation, will jointly develop maximal energy technologies from the very bones of the necropolis. Once we can determine how to activate the materials and manage the transference of energy, the tomb-worlds can be dismantled and sold in pieces."

Lord Indron held up his ring finger. "Based on our initial estimations, even a shard the size of your fingernail could boost the power output of this palanquin's battery sufficiently enough to ensure that even my grandchildren won't have to swap out batteries until they are older than I am now.

The Board is xenophobic about collaborating with other corporations, from our schools to our battlefields. Progress is slow and often the result of such covert maneuvers. The only thing that will drive the Board toward progress is money, and though it may take some years before this deal bears fruit, once it does, there will be so much money flowing that the Board will be powerless to stop it and won't want to anyway."

"House Baen will likely never forgive you for supporting the strike," said Samuel as the palanquin strode past several groups of Indron tech staff busily working to strengthen the military encampment's stationary defense structures, "Even if they can't prove that Augur gifted you with the mercenary company."

"That is the beauty and the danger of the Merchants Militant; they serve you only in so much as they serve the contract, as you veterans of Tetra Prime now understand with terrible clarity. I know many of you served alongside the Folken against the very corporation that employed them as our foes." Lord Indron smiled as he leaned back in his chair, taking a sip from his hip flask before changing the subject. "We play these games of war and economics, and we hope that we leave something of a legacy behind us. We did some good today, gentlemen."

The remainder of the ride consisted of small talk and the swapping of old war stories, mostly from Vorhold. Once the palanquin reached the center of the camp Lord Indron disembarked with a curt farewell. They had reached his headquarters, and the Lord was eager to resume direct command of the ongoing defense of Gedra Prime.

Wynn and Samuel were escorted to a simple tram system, predominantly used to rapidly move troops and supplies across the expanding network of pillboxes, bunkers, and air defense batteries that were being constructed around the dead city.

“He really had me convinced he was some kind of by the book Reaper, for years he pulled that act. It’s strange to see Boss Aiden be so cavalier, even boastful,” Samuel observed as he boarded the tram car and squeezed himself into one of the small open air seats in the mostly empty troop section. “He fought just as hard as anyone; don’t get me wrong, just strange to see the shift in personality and realizing the man I thought I knew never existed.”

“It happens more than you think, Prybar,” Marsters said with a shrug. “The elites will do what they will do, that’s one of those constants in the universe.

Sometimes the great Houses will send their lesser heirs, the second sons and daughters if you will, into either industrial management or attach them to an enforcer division. Gives them an on the ground perspective of how Grotto works. Military deployment was an unorthodox choice, though it seems to have changed him for the better,” Boss Marsters squinted into the fetid wind of the planet as it blew against them once the tram picked up speed, “Elites aren’t bad people, Prybar, they’re just so detached from the reality of the civilization they preside over that sometimes their choices seem strange, callous, or just plain villainous.”

“Serving with us certainly could have factored into his actions, I’d call that a change for the better,” responded Samuel with a raised voice in an effort to be heard over the wind rushing around them, “Even if the only reason he had us ride back with him from the Actuary’s shuttle was so he could brag about his schemes.”

“That’s the lesson, Samuel, even when it looks like the elites are helping us; they’re really just helping themselves. I’m about to be the Reaper Union Boss and drawn into the political and economic stratagems of Grotto Prime.” Marsters turned and faced Samuel, “For him to flippantly go into details of his schemes wasn’t just him confiding in old war buddies, which is what anyone watching will think, by informing us of them, he’s made us complicit, and thus implicated, in his actions. It was a power play, the first of many, and now he has a bond of secrets and of blood with the freshly minted Reaper’s Union, that may prove to be a fairly potent item in his political and economic arsenal.

No offense, but you’re here just to keep the old comrade charade believable. With you expatriating the first chance you get, there’s little risk for him in exposing his plans.

We are greedy and selfish organisms, marine, but armed with the acceptance of that fact you can adjust fire. If achieving our goals allows the elites to achieve theirs, even if there has to be some compromise to get everything lined up, then civilization stays secure.” Boss Marsters pointed to the Actuary’s ship as it launched upward

from the planet's surface and streaked into the upper atmosphere. "The Anointed know that, and that's why they'll subvert the board when they have to, or play the elite houses against each other, or relent to the demands of a labor strike. Keep civilization secure."

"Time enough for civilization when we're at war," uttered Samuel. He glanced at Marsters with a grim smile. "That's what the Folken say. I think I'm inclined to agree."

"You and half the scavengers and pirates on the Red List," Boss Marsters replied with his own smile, something Samuel had only seen him do on the rarest of occasions. "You're gonna do alright, Prybar, I think the frontier has the kind of freedom you've been looking for."

"What about you? Executive meetings and an office block on Grotto Prime for the rest of your life?" asked Samuel as the tram began to slow down when it neared the trooper drop point just outside the tent city that housed the Reaper Corps, "The Anointed didn't give you much of a choice."

"I'm from Uralisk 12, and I mustered out with the Uralisk Reaper tug a week after graduation. The Reaper life is all I know or want to know. I have two brothers, a sister, and more cousins than I can count.

In the Marsters family, one person from every generation signs on with the Corps, no exceptions. That person stays in the service as long as they can, until full retirement, death, or a crippling injury that's just too expensive to fix. That's been a tradition for nine generations of Marsters men and women. This is the job," said Wynn, with an edge of emotion in his voice and the glint of pride in his otherwise cold eyes.

"We take no spouse, we have no children, even if we want that, and trust me, I've wanted that, but they're too expensive. Our job, our tithe, is to make our wage and send it home, all of it. We help with life-bonds, we cover medical expenses, and we send the others to school. The death benefit just compounds what we can send home.

By increments, from generation to generation, the Marsters family climbs the corporate ladder on the shoulders of the Marsters Reapers.

We'll never be elites, but there's a kind of freedom that my family has because I'm in necrospace doing my duty. That's the choice we make for our family, and why I understand what you've been fighting for all these years.

I'm going to Grotto Prime to make sure that being a Reaper is still worthwhile, to empower whichever of my nieces or nephews decides to take up the rifle and the torch. For you, the right choice is to leave, and Jada too, for the rest of us, it's Grotto for life."

As he spoke, Marsters stepped off the tram and began to unfasten the hip belt he wore that had the large revolver and holster clipped to

it. The Reaper seemed to smile to himself, then he handed the belt and weapon to Samuel.

Samuel was speechless, but before he could say a word, Wynn clapped him on the shoulder and walked away into the tent city.

Samuel watched the former platoon leader, now union boss, disappear into the Reaper camp. In all the years that Samuel had served, not once had Wynn Marsters spoken of himself, his family, or his own beliefs. There had been hints and rumors going around the tug ever since the founding, but nothing seemed to stick.

For the longest time everyone assumed that Wynn and Lucinda Ulanti were an item, especially after the nightmare on Vorhold, and yet for months now, Boss Ulanti and one of the unassuming engineer techs who served as crew on the tug had been together. The two of them weren't even trying to hide the fact, so even that theory was dismantled.

Soon, the Anointed would send a shuttle for the union boss and Samuel suspected that he had just said goodbye to a man he'd never see again in this life.

11. THIS IS THE JOB

As news of the negotiations and agreements between the Anointed Actuary and the Reaper's Union traveled through Grotto Corporation, the marines of Tango Platoon returned to business as usual.

Now that the strike had ended there was little for the soldiers to do but return to their duties, only now they did so replete with the knowledge that they fought for themselves when they took up arms for Grotto Corporation.

As expected, there was a rash of retirement requests, all of which were post-dated for the next rest and refit of each individual Reaper fleet, though not nearly as many as Command had feared.

In keeping with Wynn's assurance, the average marine was willing to fight harder and serve longer once they were in a position to see real improvement in their lives and hard numbers reflected in their bank accounts.

The talk of the tug was that Helion had been made aware of the dramatic change in Grotto Corporate policy within their military. The announcement from Grotto had precipitated the cessation of open trade war hostilities. The war was declared concluded less than two weeks after the negotiations were finalized and the marines went back into combat.

Even though both Helion and Grotto had sustained heavy losses they had also realized tremendous profits. Neither was willing to yield, but had nevertheless accepted terms for a return to normalcy. Rough borders were established, and within a month the relationship between Helion and Grotto had returned to the usual clandestine warfare and tedious economic sparring.

For the Reaper Corps this meant a return to their former duties as a militarized salvage operation. Thanks to the collective bargaining they would no longer be ordered into frontline combat duties without additional contract negotiations and a right of refusal. At this point the Baen tug had pulled anchor and was left Gedra Prime in the care of House Indron.

The marines, after long months of hard duty on the planet surface, were aboard the tug and enjoying a brief respite from active status. This meant that they were in a position to eat in the tug's mess hall, which was a gourmet restaurant compared to the MRE fare that the marines had been subsisting on ever since the assault.

For once, they had been able to sit down and enjoy a meal without pressure to wolf it down and return to their positions.

"We've been pushing hard into Ellisian space for nearly two years

now," said Ben as he swirled the remnants of his nutrient mixture in the bottom of his dispenser, "With the stormtroopers and the mercs taking over the straight military operations, there's nothing left for us to do but salvage our way back to Baen."

Samuel's mind was afire with thoughts of the future, and for the first time in years he felt hopeful. He was about to fight his way home, and this time it would be the real thing.

Sura had sent him images of the homestead, and it was beyond his wildest dreams. He had never imagined that there could be so much green and life in one place. For Samuel, it had looked like paradise, even if not everyone in his unit understood that. Ben Takeda certainly did, even if the man did not share the sentiment.

"Which is how it ought to be. Leave the guts and glory to the professionals," Gretchen added.

"I got that piece of good news last night over the Boss feed," agreed Samuel, who couldn't help but smile as he looked across the table at the dozen or so marines from various platoons who still lingered in the mess hall. "We're taking the long way back. Command has us making salvage stops in nearly every system from here to the Ellisian border, then it's a hard burn to Baen 6 for rest and refit. Looking at another six months of salvage ops between here and there, though plenty of them could be hostile."

"We can handle hostile," wheezed Ben, and those who had known him long enough recognized the sound as what passed for a laugh from the man's reconstructed and digitized vocal chords.

"Talk of the tug is that Red List squatters have been sweeping in behind both Grotto and Helion fleets," said Gretchen in between sour bites of molded algae, "Setting up migrant labor camps, scrap haulers, the usual stuff."

"Everybody has to make a living, and we know better than anybody how good the salvage can be in the wake of a trade war," nodded Samuel, "Squatters and pirates, like maggots on a fresh corpse."

"Okay, that's enough!" grumbled Holland, who was seated nearby. He threw down his fork, stood up from his seat and made to leave. "If I have to eat this pressed algae crap I don't want to do it with you lot talking about dead bodies and bugs!"

Sometime later Ben and Samuel left the mess hall to the sound of Gretchen's gruff laughter.

"Jada Sek is shipping out with the Dire Swords on the morning cycle," said Samuel as they walked, "Apparently she waged some serious war in front of the mercs and then helped them kill the Alpha cyborg. They gave her enough data coins to join the Merchants

Militant three times over."

"Good of Grotto to let her expatriate before de-briefing back on Baen. I'm proud of that badass marine, she's got more soldiering in her than the Reaper Corps can utilize," agreed Ben, who then shook his head and added, "Seems a bit unfair that they'll let her muster out but are making you salvage your way home."

"Nothing for it, brother," sighed Samuel, "Besides, I think it had a lot more to do with the fact that the Dire Swords are on a nine month contract with Grotto in this sector than it did fairness. Grotto still gets its pound of flesh, one way or the other, just another reason I'm on my way out."

"I hope you and Sura find what you're looking for out there, Sam," Ben had said shortly before they had walked into the mess hall. "These days I can't imagine any life other than this one, and honestly I don't know that I'd want to. Grotto is my home, as ugly as it can be sometimes, and I'm committed to it."

"You and Gretchen are going to make some epic babies, Takeda," Samuel had said warmly as he clasped his friend's shoulder, "And because of their parents, those kids are going to have a real shot at living a good corporate life. Grotto will be a better company with people like you staying the course."

"How did you know she was pregnant?" asked Ben, his voice crackling with static that made Samuel think the man had been giving him his best approximation of a gasp. "The medicae is supposed to keep that confidential until the second trimester, when her armor won't fit anymore."

"I'm Boss Hyst remember? Protocol dictates that the medicae automatically update squad leaders with any physiological shifts in marines under their command," answered Samuel as the two of them paused at the doorway to the mess hall, both taking a moment to watch Gretchen and Harold finishing up their night cycle meal before the large man left with several of his gambling buddies from Epsilon. "The medicae sent me your paternity feed and Ulanti double-checked it with me after she was sent Gretchen's pregnancy confirmation."

"Corporate life," growled Ben in his digitized voice, which would have sounded menacing had it not been for the man shaking his head and putting his hand to his face dramatically, and then the two men had shared a laugh as they entered the mess hall.

Samuel smiled at the recent memory, and silently hoped that the two marines found a kind of happiness within the bosom of Grotto Corporation that he had never been able too. Of all the malcontents of their compulsory education division, Samuel would never have expected Ben Takeda to grow up to be a company man.

Perhaps the growing Takeda-Voss family would turn themselves

into a military dynasty like the Marsters line and slowly transform Grotto into a better company.

The strike had shaken things up, and now the labor unions were making progress of their own in the wake of the military bargain. Everyone paid a tithe, whether it was with blood, sweat, or both, and now the common people of Grotto were in a position to benefit from that price paid.

Samuel was hopeful, about his friends and his own journey, yet he tempered that hope by preparing himself mentally and emotionally for what obstacles remained in their path. There was still a long and dangerous journey across Ellisian space, countless salvage missions that could prove deadly, and not everyone was going to make it back.

This was necrospace after all.

12. KEEP WHAT YOU HOLD

Years of war and seemingly endless hardship, the long haul out of Ellisian space, the grindingly slow expatriation process, and the treacherous journey across corporate space to reach the lawless frontier, had taken their toll on the former marine, but finally, the forest homestead they had endured so much to win was a reality.

Once he'd rendezvoused with Sura aboard the Rig Halo as it anchored in high orbit over the small forest planet, it all felt absolutely worth it.

Land was cheap when there was nobody who claimed to own it, and Sura had done well in using her time aboard the prospector ship to collect the supplies and building materials their family would need to settle in the wilderness.

Sura had been a valuable member of the Rig crew, and the spirited captain Dar had been willing to delay the next expedition so that they could wait for Samuel to arrive for a much more modest fee than he could have charged. Life on the frontier was hard, especially so far from the costly convenience of corporate civilization, but the Hyst family thrived.

Those had been some good years, thought Samuel to himself just as the shooting started, and an all too short time of peace considering the price we've paid. He tightened the grip on the rifle in his hands. Now there was a violent tithe to pay before that peace and liberty could be renewed.

Samuel desperately hurled his body to the ground to narrowly avoid being riddled with bullets as one of the slavers he was facing cut loose with a modified automatic pistol. The storm of small caliber rounds chewed through the underbrush, and from the shout of pain nearby Samuel assumed one of the posse members had been hit. The former marine did his best to tuck and roll, using his fall to get him a few extra feet away from the gunman.

Samuel could tell that he had been several years removed from the rigors of military life, as his physical conditioning was not what is had once been. Still, the years of experience were etched into his muscles, his very bones, and his body moved like it once had, heedless of what pain he might be in afterwards.

He came up out of the awkward, but moderately effective roll and began firing his rifle from a mid-guard position, allowing his instincts to guide his aim as he snapped shots toward the enemy. It was difficult to tell exactly how many there were in the thick forest, though Samuel could see that their ship took up most of the clearing nearby.

Samuel knew that he had to end this as quickly as possible. The longer he gave the slavers to react to the sudden ambush the more likely they would be able to regain the advantage thanks to their superior equipment and combat experience.

Life on the frontier was hard, and the folk who chose that kind of life were as hard as the space they settled. In many ways, the people who populated the small village of Longstride Beta, reminded him of frontier versions of his old comrade Vol, presumed long since dead in Vorhold's deepspire.

They came from all walks of life, most of them like him, having found life in corporate space unsuitable and had struck out to the bleeding edge of mapped space in search of a different kind of freedom. Some were skilled techs or craftsmen, others just general laborers or unskilled folks, but few had any military experience.

That fact had landed Samuel in a leadership role, and despite several years off the job, Prybar had found himself falling back into his squad leader mindset with great ease.

The problem was that these hard-bitten settlers and adventurers weren't marines, and these slaver operatives were most certainly Tasca cartel. The former marine knew he had to end this quickly, or what had begun as a clever ambush would swiftly turn into a bloodbath.

Samuel kept firing as he sprinted diagonally in relation to the shooter, managing to score a few hits, though he wasn't convinced he'd killed anyone.

The slavers were wearing advanced dropsuits just like the operatives he'd faced in the void some years back, and it was likely that the armor would deflect anything but a clean direct hit.

Samuel's rifle clicked dry and he dropped to a knee, allowing the thick foliage to obscure his position from any hostiles who might have been tracking his progress.

The posse, roughly a dozen shooters strong, was spread across nearly a hundred yards of forest floor. As ordered, most of them were hanging back and taking shots of opportunity when they could get an operative in their sights while Samuel and four others made a frontal assault.

The ex-marine had not expected the operatives to counter-attack so quickly, and in retrospect, Samuel felt like a fool for not recalling just how deadly these high-end operatives could be. He slapped in a fresh magazine he considered his situation.

The Longstride Community was a registered co-op with the Currency Control Complex, and dutifully paid their modest taxes to maintain their status. Though insignificant in the grand machinations of corporate space, the Longstride community's registration kept them

off the Red List. While that in no way guaranteed their safety from the multitude of dangers on the frontier, they were at least free from overt interference or predation by corporate interests.

Perhaps if the Longstriders had settled upon a world with rich resources, being a registered entity would not matter so much to the corporate mercenaries and expeditionary forces that would wipe them out and stake a claim, after the correct bribes and paperwork had been filed. Pirates and scavengers honored no codes or regulations.

As yet, none had sought to attack Longstride for a very specific reason, the very reason that Sura and Samuel had chosen to buy into the co-op and settle there. This primordial world had no real resource value, there were no mineral or gas deposits worth exploiting, and despite being covered in thick rain forests the profit margin of frontier timber was too small for corporate interest to concern itself.

The only commodity the fringe world had was its beauty, and other than the three small villages, each with populations of only a few hundred, and the occasional homestead, the world remained untouched by human industry. Such abstract value was meaningless to the corporate world, and so Longstride had nothing worth taking.

Sadly, there was one resource worth fighting over, thought Samuel to himself as he racked the slide of his rifle and began creeping low towards the clearing while his posse continued to exchange salvos with the operatives, and that was the Longstriders themselves.

The anger boiled in Samuel's blood as he considered the harsh truth that even here, on the edge of the known universe, the hand of greed and exploitation could still strike them.

It made perfect sense in a horrific sort of way, that small non-militarized communities like Longstride would be soft targets for slavers. Likely this task force was moving through the sector, dropping human cargo on one of the outlaw agri-worlds or taking a shortcut across the frontier to reach some of the more far flung trading posts of corporate space and they noticed Longstride by happenstance.

There had been a violent raid on Longstride Alpha three days ago and Samuel had organized the posse to ambush the raiding party that he expected to assault Longstride Beta. This world was just a target of opportunity for the slaver crew, though once they were committed to action Samuel had a solid guess at the enemy's most likely landing point.

It was arrogance, really, that led the slavers to pick this clearing, thought Samuel, doing his best to ignore the firefight raging behind him that was likely claiming the lives of more than a few of the village posse.

Had the hostiles been engaging an enemy for which they had

more respect, the operatives would have used their dropsuits to simply descend from high atmosphere and slam into the center of town. Once they'd scooped up their targets the ship would break atmosphere and swoop down to retrieve the boxed cargo, then the operatives would use the thrusters on their suits to blast-jump to a more remote spot for their own extraction. However, lightning raids like that involved heavy expenditures of fuel and ammunition, and after sacking Longstride Alpha, no doubt the slavers were of the opinion that a more inexpensive frontal assault would result in a more robust Bottom Line. Why spend the resources on a jump raid when they could just march into town and seize it at gunpoint?

Samuel was determined to use that hubris against them. He sighted in on the slaver's camp and saw that his estimations of their stratagem were spot on.

The slave ship rested in the clearing, its landing gear fully extended. The engines weren't even on standby, but completely cold. No mobile defenses had been erected, not even so much as a flak board stood between the treeline and the belly of the ship.

These slavers thought they could just park their ride a few miles outside the village and capture the entire population on the cheap, instead of using up expensive fuel and bullets for a twenty percent haul.

The former marine had picked the spot because that's where he would have landed troop carriers if he'd planned on a ground assault of the village and his soldier's instincts had proven right.

While the five or six armored operatives fought it out in the forest with the village posse, it looked to Samuel that seven assorted tech and security staff were scrambling to pack up the camp that had spread out around the ship. The casual confidence and hostile swagger he'd watched them display through his field glasses moments before the ambush was gone.

Jax and Tanya tapped the primitive binary com-beads that Samuel had rigged for the op, and he could see the two surviving members of his assault team crouching just behind the treeline on the other side of the clearing. Samuel tapped the fire order into his own bead and raised his rifle to his shoulders.

Jax was as much of a backwater frontier native as they came, with a thick Longstrider accent and a talent for hunting game, the latter of which he employed with deadly effectiveness as he fired his bolt-action rifle with the kind of speed that only came from a lifetime of use.

Tanya was an expatriate from Praxis Mundi who had fallen in love with Longstride and the small forest planet during her time as a border pilot for the transportation corporation. Though she was a fair

shot with the bull-pup assault rifle she'd brought with her from corporate space, it was her former profession that had made her part of Samuel's team.

While the hunting rifles and shot casters that were common fare among the frontier folk were not particularly effective against the armored dropsuits of the operators, the rounds from Jax's rifle worked just fine on the lesser protected tech and security staffers.

Boss Kade had pulled some strings when Samuel had mustered out, a parting gift of sorts, and the former marine had been allowed to keep his Reaper kit when he expatriated. Samuels assault rifle was of Grotto design, and the low tech robustness of his former corporation's technology had turned out to be a boon on this backwater world, as the weapon would fire any ammunition that was the proper caliber, regardless of manufacture patterns or trademark stamp.

Samuel kept his rifle on semi-automatic, and let his breath out slowly and forcefully as he moved his sights from target to target, putting three rounds into each as he moved.

Their combined attack left five dead and dying on the ground before the remaining three slavers had a chance to react. Once they did, it again revealed the quality of the Tasca cartel's hiring department.

Jax and Tanya attempted to cross a section of open clearing, perhaps thinking that the deadly crossfire had been enough to push the enemy back, only to find themselves in the line of fire as two security staffers counter attacked.

Samuel cursed aloud as he watched Jax get flung backwards by several hard rounds. The well-meaning, but untrained huntsman was dead before his body tumbled to the ground in a bloody heap. Tanya fared somewhat better, thanks to being encased in Samuel's combat armor, and of the half dozen pistol rounds that struck her only one punched through a joint in the armor and bit into the meat of her hip.

Wasting no time, Samuel flanked the two security staff, hoping that he could dispatch them before the tech staffer thought to arm herself and join the fray. The former marine pounded two shots into the thigh of one security staffer before the weapon clicked dry. Samuel shouted in frustration at his less than honed combat detail awareness, as he would not have made such a mistake just a few years ago.

As the first staffer fell to the ground Samuel hurled his rifle at the second, forcing the man to raise his arms to protect himself, giving Samuel a chance to tackle the man to the ground.

Samuel and the security staffer were a tangle of thrashing limbs as they struggled and when Samuel stood up with his bloody boarding knife in his hands he wasn't sure when he had drawn it. The wounded

staffer had his pistol pointed at Samuel's chest, but before he pulled the trigger a sustained burst from Tanya's assault rifle pulped the hostile.

The tech staffer was one step ahead of the two frontier folk, and depressed the hatch closure button just as Samuel had re-armed himself. The former pilot and marine reached the hatch just as it slammed shut, though Samuel had prepared for this eventuality.

"Watch my back, Tanya, this torch is quick, but those dropsuit troopers might survive the crossfire and attempt to return to the ship." Samuel sparked his Reaper hand torch and started cutting at the seam of the hatch. His torch was another piece of Grotto equipment that was somewhat peerless in corporate space for its ability to run on just about any kind of battery power and could cut through almost anything within in seconds.

Samuel moved quickly, as he was not concerned with keeping the ship space worthy, all he cared about was getting inside. Already the engines were spooling up and the marine knew that one or more crew inside were attempting to make an escape.

After a few more intense seconds the hatch lock burst into slag and Samuel was able to jam his pry bar into the breach so that he could force the door. A less experienced welder, certainly one trying to be more careful, would have taken twice the time. The hatch opened and Samuel rushed in, dragging Tanya by the shoulder as he did, just in time to prevent her from being hit with a barbed net as it slammed into where she'd been standing.

"Looks like the operatives realized they were about to get left behind!" spat Samuel as he sprinted across the airlock and began cutting the interior hatch. "Use the door as cover and don't worry about conserving ammo, pouring on the fire is the only way you'll keep them off us!"

Samuel pushed the sound of Tanya's assault rifle from his mind as he focused on cutting the lock on the interior hatch. Once he got through that the ship's pilot would be forced to start closing interior doors and cutting off sections of the ship to keep the vessel from de-pressurizing when they broke atmosphere. The pilot, even if a hardened slaver, would have to run a diagnostic on the ship before sealing off compartments, and in those few seconds Samuel knew he would have to reach the pilot's deck.

The ship was small, a converted cutter much like the one he'd seen years ago in Ellisian space, and he knew it wouldn't take long. The lock fell to slag and the former marine shouldered his way through, falling to his knees by instinct as he entered, which kept the shotgun blast from ripping him to shreds. The marine fired his own rifle upwards in several bursts and the security staffer who had

attempted to kill him flailed against the wall and then slumped to the ground with multiple holes in her torso.

"*Tanya move up! On me! On me!"* Samuel shouted as he raised his rifle and rushed down the corridor toward a two way hatch. By the time he reached it Tanya came thumping in behind him, the combat armor so bulky and unfamiliar that she was having trouble keeping up with him.

"There are at least two of them pressing in behind us, I didn't see or hear any of our people in pursuit, might have lost everybody," said Tanya, already out of breath but obviously making the effort to stay in the fight.

"We've got to get you to the pilot's deck, that's one deck up," said Samuel as he affixed his boarding knife to the bayonet lug on his rifle, doing his best not to think about Sura and Orion as he considered the fact that he and Tanya were attempting a boarding action that should have been done at squad strength at a minimum. "I'll clear it out then you come up fast as you can, we'll switch places and I'll handle the operatives while you take control of the ship."

Tanya nodded as Samuel cut the lock to the pilot's deck. She couldn't see what happened to the former marine when he kicked open the door and leapt inside, but she heard the furious firefight that lasted for several seconds, which she'd learned today was a lifetime in terms of combat. An operative attempted to rush down the corridor and she hosed him down with her last magazine. The slaver must have been already wounded or desperate to have attempted such a mad dash, though Tanya considered herself lucky to have managed to put him down. She turned back and Samuel, blood dripping from his bayonet and two ragged holes in his side, stepped up to her position.

"The pilot's deck is ours," he said just before wincing in pain from his wounds, "Wipe the nav logs and set the launch sequence and trajectory for Waypoint 229157, that'll drive this ship straight through necrospace where somebody's bound to capture and scrap it, just like we planned."

"Nobody will ever know they were here," said Tanya grimly, "And nobody will come looking for them either."

"Get it done, I'll make for the cargo bay," said Samuel as he turned to point his rifle shakily down the corridor. "They'll have everyone from the Longstrider Alpha raid in cryo-crates in ship's hold."

Tanya entered the pilot deck and Samuel pressed forward into the corridor. He knew that Tanya would do as instructed, and without her pilot's experience all he would have been able to do otherwise was short out the ship and ground it. The problem was that most cartel ships had geo-trackers, and if the ship stayed here, sooner or later

another slaver would come looking for their lost comrades. By wiping the nav log and scuttling the ship in the void, the vessel and the crew would just be chalked up to shrinkage on Tasca's balance sheet and the cartel would be none the wiser.

Samuel held his rifle in a mid-guard position, now unable to raise it to his shoulder thanks to the two bullet wounds in his side. The former marine couldn't tell how bad they were, and hoped that Doc Rayburn had survived the firefight outside, as Samuel could tell he was going to need professional attention. The old man might have been ousted from the ordo medicae for malpractice, but he did a good job of keeping the folks of Longstride Beta in decent health.

The marine mentally pushed his pain aside and rounded the corner just as the final operative attempted to bring up his trap caster. Samuel had seen the armored man's shadow and knew the move was coming. He was able to duck under the barrel and avoid being caught in the high velocity net as it streaked over his head. The marine fired point blank into the man's mid-section and the operative tumbled backwards and out of the airlock. Samuel checked his ammo count and saw that he was down to two rounds, and hoped that this operative was indeed the only survivor of the ambush.

The cargo bay was positioned on the opposite side of the pilot deck, and Samuel wasted no time in continuing down the corridor towards the access hatch. He was confident that he'd scored at least one critical hit against the armored slaver and hoped that would buy him the time to eject the cryo-crates before the launch.

Now that Tanya controlled the ship she had opened the access hatch and even as Samuel moved into the cargo bay the outer airlock was opening. The former marine could see that six cryo-crates were double-stacked in three rows, all still sitting on their loading tracks. Samuel gave a sigh of relief when he realized that all he had to do was activate the loader and guide the crates back onto solid ground.

It had been some years since he had worked as a deckhand on board the Reaper tug, and even then it was only during the Ellisian deployment that he'd logged many hours in that capacity. When the trade war broke out the marines often had found themselves assisting the techs in crew duties when the bullets weren't flying.

As Samuel used the controls to off-load the crates he counted roughly forty human beings, at least a third of them children, and could not help but imagine the faces of Sura and Orion among them. It was good that he had been here, he thought as he set down the last crate, because the Longstride Community, now his community, was certainly in need of soldiers.

"You can only keep what you can hold," said Samuel to himself, the cliché words of the prospector feeling more solid than ever.

Samuel stumbled out of the airlock and back into the clearing, his vision getting fuzzy from blood loss. The operative was holding his mid-section and weakly attempting to drag himself away from the ship. Samuel could see several villagers emerge from the treeline, but his vision had gotten blurry and he couldn't tell who was who among them. The slaver operative raised his helmet's visor and spit up a globule of blood before he tried to speak.

"*Wait!* I got no loyalty to Tasca past the last pay period," said the man as he held a hand up in a clear gesture for mercy. "We're not the bad guys; it's just that human cargo pays the best. This is the job."

Samuel stopped dead at the use of the familiar phrase in an accent not unlike his own, and his expression went as cold as it had ever been.

Moments later two shots rang out across the clearing.

Shortly after that the engines of the slaver ship ignited and the craft disappeared into the upper atmosphere, shooting into the void beyond.

EPILOGUE

Sura Hyst awoke to the orange rays of sunlight as they bathed the small room with the soft glow of morning. For several moments she did not move, and let the sun warm the already bronzed skin of her back and legs that were not draped in the smooth sheets of the bed. She thought that Orion must have opened the windows of the front room, as the fresh scent of the forest hung in the air, no doubt carried in by the gentle breeze that never ceased to blow through their secluded valley.

She sighed deeply and rolled over to face the other side of the bed, hoping that this time would be different, but it wasn't. Samuel's side of the bed still lay undisturbed, as it had for the last three days. Sura sat up and ran her fingers through her hair.

With a deep breath and closed eyes she basked in the sunlight coming in through the window for a few moments more, then rose from the bed to pad into the front room after strapping a pistol belt around her slim waist and slipping a heavy, bladed revolver into the empty holster.

Orion had already carved up several pieces of succulent fruit, and had arranged it on a small plate along with some strips of smoked fish. She smiled at that as she poured herself a steaming mug of water and dropped in the ground tea roots the boy had provided. She took her drink and breakfast to the covered patio on the other side of a sliding glass door in the front room.

As she walked outside Sura paused and looked back into the house. Her eyes swept across the little cabin, with its two bedrooms, modest kitchen in the corner of the front room, and the single bathroom. It was a small place for a family to live, but she and Samuel had grown up in Grotto space and were used to living in small areas. Now that the valley was home, they had seen little reason to build more space than they needed. Let the forest be home had been their saying, and even now that still held true.

Their nearest neighbor was miles away, and unless they made a special trip into the village, for school, supplies, or festival, there was little to distract them from the enjoyment of day to day life.

Sura set her plate down on the simple table in the center of the patio and nibbled a bit of fruit before taking a sip from her mug.

There was a keening wail from somewhere nearby, just inside the tree line that bordered the small clearing where their house rested. Sura recognized it as Cragg, the saurian companion of her son Orion. Cragg often accompanied the boy on his regular forays into the wild.

He was soon to be a young man, thought Sura to herself, and it

would not be long before he would begin to ask the hard questions about his father, and about their life on this lawless and violent frontier.

Sura moved to the front of the steps that led down into the clearing and placed her hand on a weather worn and blast-scarred helmet that had been mounted on a post at the front of the house. One day their son would want to know everything, about Grotto, about the Reapers, and why they had chosen to homestead this primordial wilderness planet.

That would be quite a day indeed.

Sura took another swallow of her tea and gripped the helmet as if to steady herself with the distant presence of her husband. They had succeeded in finding their share of the good life, had enjoyed it for several years, and Sura hoped hard that their time together was not yet ended.

“Come home soon, Reaper,” she said aloud, as if saying it not just to herself, but to the world at large.

Orion and Cragg emerged from the forest and Sura could hear the familiar low drone of an all-terrain skiff approaching the valley. Whether it was her Samuel astride the skiff he’d taken with him or someone from the village returning his corpse remained to be seen.

Sura took a deep breath and stood with her hand on the helmet, knowing that she would have her answer soon enough.

The End

UNTIL THAT DAY

A Note from the Author

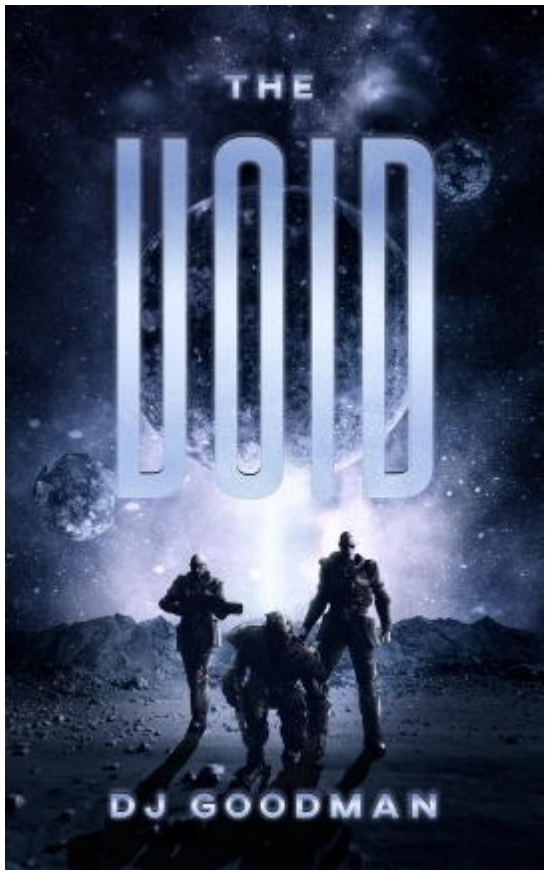
Thank you for taking this grim adventure alongside the Reapers of Grotto Corporation.

There are no easy answers in this age of industry, none more elusive and critical as a person's place in the world. Do we abandon a broken system to forge a new path on the edge of the frontier or do we endure the status quo until we can change it from within?

Nothing to do but take up your rifle and make a choice.

This is the final novel of what you could call the "Reaper Trilogy", and I invite you to continue adventuring with me in an expanded universe. This series will continue in the form of stand alone novels depicting the lives and struggles of a variety of characters, some familiar and some brand new, all inter-connected in the great web of commerce and combat that is Necrospace.

Read on for a free sample of *The Void*



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It was the single most disconcerting sight Vichna Lashke had ever seen in her life. On one side of the bridge's view screen she could see a field of stars, the entire expanse of the Milky Way and every star system humanity had ever visited or colonized. The other side was dark, inky blackness, a true void that her mind had trouble comprehending. Sure, if she looked in the right places she might see tiny smudges of color, all that the naked eye could see of other galaxies in their own corners of the universe. Except those were few and far between, doing little to relieve the disquiet from the reminder that she was quite literally on the edge of nothingness.

She could tell that the four hired mercenaries currently on the bridge, all official members of the crew unlike her, had similar

feelings. The captain, Mart Lersson, sat in their chair absently picking at a piece of skin on their thumb. It was the quietest Vichna had seen Captain Lersson since meeting them thirteen standard days ago. On the other hand, the pilot, Elric Gregs, was uncharacteristically chatty, his voice providing a constant running commentary on everything from their speed to life sign readings. The latter, of course, was completely needless out here, but simply saying that there was nothing, or that nobody could live out here, seemed to help him deal with that fact.

Like Vichna, the two remaining people on the bridge didn't have to be here for this part. Also like her, they apparently hadn't been able to fight their curiosity. Both Bas Merton and Lussa Dakkenspear were here as security, the reason Vichna's backers had hired this particular mercenary team. They were the firepower in the unlikely event that they all came across something during the mission that required itchy trigger fingers. Vichna had protested using a team that included so many ex-marines and fleet members when she was helping put the mission together, but in the case of Lussa, at least, Vichna was glad her backers had outvoted her. In the previous two weeks, they had become close, even sharing a bed on occasion when the boredom of deep space got to them and they needed something (or someone) to do. Bas was a different story. Vichna couldn't exactly say she disliked him, but he came from a planet with some very old-fashioned views not shared by the rest of the mercenary crew. All attempts Vichna had made at talking to him had been tense, like at any moment he expected her to say something offensive so he could chew her out.

The only other person on the ship was Deck down in the engine room. He was an odd one, preferring to spend his time tinkering with the space-fold drive rather than hanging around anyone else, but during the few times Vichna had interacted with him, he'd been pleasant. Captain Lersson said he was the one on the ship with the experience in these deep space missions, and the sight of all the blackness had done strange things to his personality. Experiencing the emptiness herself now for the first time, Vichna could understand.

Captain Lersson looked her direction and must have seen something worrisome on her face. "It's not always this disturbing," they said. "You get used to it."

"How many times have you been out this far?" Vichna asked.

"This is my second time," Lersson said.

"But I thought you said Deck had been to the edge several times."

Gregs was the one who answered her. "Deck wasn't with the marines. He was with the fleet. He served on the Merv Swansson for three years."

Vichna certainly recognized the name of the ship. She should,

considering the role it had played in the Violet and Lily Wars, which had been the subject of many of her studies. It annoyed her a little that they had such a notable veteran with them this whole time, yet no one had thought to tell her before now. Although part of that was her own fault, she supposed. The team knew that they'd been hired to escort her to find something, but to maintain secrecy, none of them had been told exactly what yet. Now they were here, though, practically on top of it from a galactic standpoint, and completely out of range for any kind of space-fold contact with any ship, colony, or inhabited planet.

"These are the correct coordinates I gave you?" Vichna asked the captain.

"We're coming up on them. Can you finally tell us what exactly we're looking for?"

"If you find something out here, anything at all, then obviously that's what we're here for."

"Then maybe we were paid to come out here for nothing, because I'm not seeing anything." There was a very clear note of frustration in the captain's voice, and Vichna couldn't blame them. All the people on the ship were right now on the very edge of the known galaxy. Here there were no outposts, no emergency supply caches, no help of any kind. It would have been dangerous if there were even anything out here to be afraid of, unless she counted the emptiness of space itself. If they went out any farther, they would vanish into the literal nothingness of the universe.

Which, of course, was why someone long ago had decided this would be the perfect hiding place.

"Finally picking up a faint radioactive signature," Gregs said from his console. "It's not much stronger than the background radiation. Probably wouldn't have noticed it if we weren't looking." He turned to Vichna. "Is that it?"

"I think so," she said. She actually knew so, but after so long searching for it, she almost felt afraid to jinx herself at the last moment.

"Visual?" Captain Lersson asked Gregs.

"It's still pretty far away," he said. "But whatever it is, it's big."

"How big?" Vichna asked.

"Similar to a decent-sized asteroid." He looked to her for confirmation that was correct, but Vichna couldn't speak. For most of her life, nearly one hundred and thirty-two years, she'd been looking for this. Granted, that only made her middle-aged, but sometimes it had felt like longer.

"So are you finally going to tell us what it is?" Lussa asked. "Or are you going to leave us guessing all the way up until the moment we

can actually see it?"

"If I'm right, you'll want to wait," Vichna said. "This should be impressive. I hope."

"We've still got some distance to go yet before we'll even be able to make out details," Gregs said. "Want me to space fold until we're right next to it?"

The captain looked like they were about to okay this, but Vichna stopped them. "No! There… there might be some danger if we show up too suddenly." The captain shrugged. If anyone was upset at the idea that what they were here for might be dangerous, nobody showed it. They were usually paid for danger, after all, and they also had the mini-arsenal that her sponsors had paid to be brought along with them in the hold of the ship.

It took several more minutes before they were able to see anything with the naked eye, a problem caused by both the distance and the near-total lack of light. They had to rely on sensor images for most of the approach even as they got closer, and Vichna had the sensation of a large, invisible mouth approaching from ahead. Finally, they were close enough that the measly amount of light given off by their ship could be seen against the side of the approaching…

"Whoa," Merton said. "What even is that?"

"That" was a matte-black, blocky structure floating in the emptiness for no apparent reason. The design didn't look like anything special, or even functional for that matter. It looked like the designer (as the thing was definitely man-made) had simply taken a cube and then haphazardly continued to add smaller cubes to random places on its sides until the entire thing resembled a heavily-pixilated peanut. It would have seemed ridiculous if not for the enormous size of it. Gregs' estimation that it was the size of an asteroid wasn't far off, yet the thing still dwarfed their ship by a magnitude of about twenty or thirty. And even now, it was still hard to see, as whatever material it had been made out of was pure black and absorbed everything but direct light shined right upon it. Vichna looked to see if the structure had any thrusters or engines, something to indicate how it had been moved here in the first place, but there was nothing. She supposed it could have been built directly in this spot, although it was hard to imagine any construction team being able to stay sane in the emptiness long enough to finish it.

"This is really what we were hired to come out here and find?" the captain asked.

"Yes, this is it," Vichna said, not that she had ever seen it or even found a proper description of it. No one had, even if it was a fairy tale that everyone had heard at least once in their lifetimes. "It has to be. There's nothing else it could be."

“Well?” Merton asked. “Are you finally going to grace our ears with whatever secret you’ve been keeping?”

Vichna took a deep breath, less because she needed it and more for dramatic effect. “It’s the Void.”

Three of the four other people on the bridge reacted exactly the way she’d hoped they would. Captain Lersson turned to her with an expression that clearly said they didn’t believe her. Gregs also stared at her but with his mouth agape. Merton just kept staring at the image on the screen in front of them. He was the only one on the ship with skin light enough for Vichna to see him visibly pale. Only Lussa looked confused.

“The Void?” she asked.

Vichna was about to answer but Merton beat her to it. “A space station. The space station. The one used by Captain Melissa Harvey.”

“Oh,” was all Lussa could say. That name she clearly recognized. Vichna would have been shocked if she hadn’t. It did, after all, belong to the worst mass murderer ever known to the human race, a woman responsible for the complete genocide of eight entire star systems.

They all stared at the station floating outside their ship, a creation that most people only knew as something out of their nightmares. For many seconds, no one spoke.

Finally, Gregs said, “I thought it would be bigger.”

The Void is available from Amazon here

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